Praise for Mean Business

"*Mean Business* by Mark Slade is 4 shots of classic crime fiction with a sharp modern twist." — **Paul D. Brazill,** author of *Last Year's Man* and *Guns Of Brixton*

"Mark Slade has got two things that most authors don't: talent and balls - great big elephant-sized balls. He's a writer who isn't afraid to take the reader into the darkest places of the human condition and show them things they don't want to see, or more to the point things they didn't know they wanted to see. He is completely unrelenting, and his writing is gripping from word one right to the very end." — **Andy Rausch,** author of *Bloody Sheets*

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Mean Business

A Barry London Book

by Mark Slade

Close To The Bone
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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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Mean Business

FOREWORD

by Jason Norton

At first, I thought he was British.

It was an honest mistake.

He was working for a UK horror magazine, and relayed the news that although my short story had been accepted, it would never see print with his publication, seeing as how they were folding in six months.

I mean, even his name sounded British.

Mark Slade.

Like an MI6 agent from a BBC serial.

An honest mistake, right?

A couple of months later, he contacted me with news he may have found another home for my fledgling story and I found out that he was not only American, but practically my neighbor. Turns out he lives about an hour away from me.

Maybe he *was* a spy.

Because in the ensuing five years since our first email exchange, he's kept tabs on me. He's offered me more work in this field than anyone. He's always contacted me when he had a project where he felt I could make a worthwhile contribution. It's safe to say, I owe him a lot.

He's been my editor, and I've been his. We've been co-contributors, co-creators and co-producers on more projects than I ever thought would see the light of day. And one way or another, because of our first Dear Jason-esque exchange, we've cranked out a healthy, mutual dose of some creepy, crazy stuff.

And throughout that chance association I've finally

deduced his true identity.

Mark Slade is a gangster.

Sure, he may claim to hail from a sleepy little town and punch a clock at a blue collar gig. He can even put on a molasses-thick Southern accent in certain company. But he can't hide his stripes. Not from his readers. Nope, I'm convinced. Slade is a straight-up, stone-cold mafioso.

Need a story published? He's your guy.

Have an idea for a book? He's your guy.

Wanna adapt your experimental micro fiction piece about a suicidal werewolf enjoying his final meal at a Valentine's Day sweetheart's dinner? He's your guy.

And if for some inexplicable reason he can't get it done, he's *got* a guy. And he'll introduce you—not as a friend of *his,* as Al Pacino explains in *Donnie Brasco,* but as a friend of *ours*—and suddenly you're in with his guy and you're working some serious jobs you'd have never been part of otherwise.

And every now and then, he'll shake you down for a favor, like say, writing a foreword to one of his many books. But it never feels like a chore. Far from it. It's an honor.

He's a gangster.

That's the only way to explain it.

Because how else would he be able to write Barry London?

Slade's penned everything from rabbit-suit murderers to immortal newsman occultists, but perhaps none of his characters have been as intriguing as mob fixer Barry London.

London's as rough and tumble as they come, but tempers his itchy trigger finger with a whiplash wit, oft times beating his adversaries to the cerebral punch if not the physical one. But Slade doesn't make it easy for the rowdy wise guy. Not at all.

In this collection of shorts, including the eponymous *Mean Business*, London blasts and belts his way through a motley mix of backwoods pushers, Uzi-toting adolescents, self-proclaimed messiahs, pedophiliac pornographers and a traveling family of obese assassins who deal death from the back of their mini van.

Slade twists the narrative on his surly protagonist every chance he gets, and just like a Scorsese epic, there are backstabs and double crosses at every turn. A gallery of quirky co-stars flesh out London's adventures—elder mobster Leon 'Pop' Brown plays as London's father figure while Cuban crime boss Peter Choaladi delivers London's marching orders, mostly from the shadows. And the final supporting role goes to the soundtrack Slade weaves into his tales, punctuating each yarn with its own unique timber and rhythm.

It's fast and fun, full of fists and firepower and just when you think you know where it's going, it takes a rug-pulling left turn that makes you wonder how you didn't see it coming.

Sorta like an ice pick through the back of the neck.

Yep, I figured it out.

Mark Slade is a gangster.

And he's about to make you a friend of ours.

Jason Norton
1/8/19

For
Tracey, Zoey, and Chachi.
To the memory of Giz, and Betty Jane,
who always loved a good mystery,
and the rest of my friends and family.

The Last Savior

1

"I killed him," Mya Stone said.

"I can see that," Barry London handed her a lit cigarette. "I see him in your bathtub... facedown."

She was naked, sitting on the lid of her toilet, looking very morose. As a thirty-five year old woman, she still had a very nice body, even with a bit of a pouch from having two children. Her wet blond hair was cut shorter than the pictures in the magazine London was given. Mya Stone was mostly known for the terrible sitcom about a character that was a photojournalist and her Father who was also her editor. The sitcom lasted two seasons, was never a ratings success, but in syndication on cable channels, it was a blockbuster.

London was called in by Choaladi to find Haze Delegaura. Someone had kidnapped the famed gangster and Choaladi feared this getting out might cause a mob war. So he sent London to a former girlfriend's house to see what she knew. Turns out, Mya's father had business with Choaladi years ago when her parents ran a clothing store on 57th Avenue. Haze was an old rival of just about everyone in the business. Choaladi didn't like Haze any more than anyone else. Choaladi was the type who wanted to keep the peace. His nature.

London worked for a lot of wise guys, but his main boss was Peter Choaladi. London did six years in state prison for the man. Choaladi had an interest in a jewelry robbery and it would have been his third strike. So London was picked as his stand-in. He was given fifteen years, but Choaladi got it reduced to six with whatever deals he could make. They let him out in four for good behavior.

Mya was staring at the dead man, who was sitting on his heels, his head and arms in the bathtub. He too was naked. He had a long angular body that showed he worked out, but no muscle overstated anywhere; he was just toned. London slipped on a pair of plastic gloves, stepped to the tub and caught the dead man by his hair. He pulled the man's face out of the water. Huge dead eyes stared back, resting on a slim, slightly bearded face with a thin nose and wide fat lips that were smiling.

Mya said his name was Scarfe. A guru, or 'humanity's last savior'. Some kind of bullshit like that.

London wasn't sure. He thought he'd seen this fool on one of the cable news channels being interviewed. London did, however, remember reading an article about Scarfe in the newspaper. Talking about saving the world from humans, then saving humans from themselves by teaching them to look inward and how wrong it was for everyone to think he was preying on vulnerable, shallow people in Hollywood.

What else is new? London thought. But what the hell was he smiling about? Unless that was the sort of game the two of them played. Obviously they had sex. Semen was drying on Mya's small breasts. London was about to ask Mya about a lot of things, when she decided to come clean and she did so in such feverish way, she made London's head spin. Her voice melded with the sobs. He didn't understand a word she spoke.

"Whoa," London held his hands up. "Slow down. Slow down. Smoke your cigarette, calm down." London sighed, wiped his face with a hand, which he did often when he became agitated. "This man is Wesley Scarfe. Correct?"

"Correct," Mya's voice shook.

"You two were... uh... having some fun, right?"

"We had sex, if that's what you mean."

"Yeah," London nodded. He started to say something else. Mya interrupted him.

"I had to," she said.

"Huh? You mean he forced you?"

"It was... my duty," Mya said.

London looked at her incredulously. "Okay. Did you want to or not?"

"Doesn't matter whether I want to have sex with Enigma. You just have to. If he picks you."

"Sex with... what? What's an Enigma?"

"Enigma. That's his... real name," Mya said.

"Uh huh. I thought his name was Wesley," London said. He brushed his face with a hand again, caught himself and put the hand in his jean pocket.

"When he discovered the truths of the world, Wesley rechristened himself Enigma. You, as a person, are a mystery. In order to learn about yourself, you need Enigma to look into your mind and heart."

"I see," London had so much more to say, but couldn't think straight with Mya's brainwashed bullshit. London noticed she had a tattoo just above her vagina. "What's the tattoo of?"

"This?" She stood up so he could get a better view. "This is not a tattoo."

London leaned in closer. It was not a tattoo, it was a branding of initials, two sets of initials as a matter of fact. He gently traced the branding with a finger. It was just the letter E. But there were the letters A and S, carved in her flesh in what looked like old English handwriting. "The E is for Enigma, right? Meaning Scarfe?"

"Yes," Mya shuddered at his touch, sighed deeply. She placed a hand on his shoulder, leaned down to kiss him. London pulled away. "What?"

"Not now," he said forcefully. "We have a problem to solve. I'm not here for..." London pointed at the dead man in her tub. "I'm looking for Haze, to be frank."

Mya sighed. "I-I-I don't know where Haze is. I haven't seen him in a year."

London knew Mya was lying. He checked things out before he came to Mya's place.

She went back to the kiss, pouting. "And... after this is over with…?"Mya said, letting the question linger. "Us?"

London let it hang there without an answer. He stood, grabbed a towel and wrapped it around Mya. "Tell me about the branding."

"I... I... really don't like to talk about it," she said.

"I need to know everything. Tell me what's up with it? Some weird ritual?"

Mya nodded. "That's it exactly," she paused, continued. "Ten of us were chosen. We were asked to take photos of ourselves, naked...in compromising positions."

"As in what?"

"Masturbating. Different positions."

"That's what Enigma liked?"

"And his assistant. Second in command."

"Second in command. Is that his initials on the other side of Enigma's?"

"Not a *He*," Mya said. "A *She*. Anna Salvino."

"The news woman?"

"Former News anchor. She gave it all up for Enigma. She was the one who picked us for the branding."

"What's the purpose of that? Picked you for what?"

"To be their wives. To own us. Slaves," Mya said. "However you want to put it. They own us."

"What happened here, Mya? You seem fairly intelligent. Did he rape you...?"

"No." There was a strange monotone in her voice.

No emotion at all. "I wanted to give my body and soul to Enigma."

"And to Anna?" London asked. Mya didn't want to answer at first. He could tell she was struggling with that. Was it a secret part of her sexuality she never knew existed? London reckoned it wasn't. He felt she was more of a rape victim.

"It's all a part of the education we receive to the higher self. So, yes."

"Why did you kill him if you care so much for him?"

London felt something hard slam against the back of his head. He fell to his knees, eyes still on Mya. Blurred vision came first, then darkness.

2

When London awoke, Mya and Scarfe were gone.

Vision was still a little blurry and the back of his head was still vibrating from the blow. London tried hard to collect his thoughts.

London slowly picked himself off the bathroom floor. He sat on the toilet, lit a cigarette. Pain invaded his thoughts. He closed his eyes and reopened them. He looked down at the floor. Water was all around the tub where they had taken Scarfe. Did Mya try to hide the body herself?

He noticed a trail of blood on the tiles that led to the kitchen and out the backdoor, which was left wide open. Someone made a mistake. They stepped in the blood, left a shoe print at the backdoor. London recognized the tread on the shoes. Excelsior tennis shoes. The shoes had an unusual tread, zig zags going one way and zig zags going across the other tread, three circles at the top and at the heel.

London took his phone from his breast pocket. He immediately dialed Choaladi's number.

"Yeah?" The cracked voice on the other end said.

"Got a problem," London said.

"Okay Barry. What happened?"

"Somebody ambushed me. The back of my head feels like mashed potatoes. Mya Stone and the body are gone."

"Shit," Choaladi said. "You know the guy?"

"No, I don't know him. But I've seen him on TV. His name is Scarfe. He runs a self-help cult."

"Son of a bitch!" Choaladi went offline for a few

seconds, coughed, then spat.

"What, Manny? What's wrong?"

"That jerk off gives thirty percent to Haze."

"Haze Deleguara?" London said.

"Yeah, Deleguara," Choaladi confirmed the news. "She killed him?"

"That's what Mya said. She killed him. They were having some fun, decided to take it to the bathroom and she must've flipped out, drowned him. They had a weird Slave-Master thing going on."

"Damn. What's wrong with people? Can't they just kiss and make love like in the old days?" Choaladi hacked something up and spat. 'I never heard such shit in Cuba. Not until I came here to America. Okay, find the girl, Barry, before Haze finds out that jerk-off is dead."

"What do you want done with Scarfe?"

"Make him disappear. Make it mysterious. Maybe they'll do books, even a movie about him, and Haze can keep collecting from the jerk-off's cult."

"Got it," London hung up, put his phone back in his breast pocket.

3

London happened to look up through the bathroom window and saw a man looking at him. The face was distorted some by reinforced glass, but London could see this guy was not all there. His little beady eyes sat on a bloated face and extended chin. The nose was flat and puffy with nostrils spread too far apart. What little hair he had was sticking up in the air.

The man noticed London. A frightened look crept into those little black eyes and he backed away from the window.

London filled his hands with his Glock and sprinted toward the front door, knocking over trinkets on a shelf. He kicked the door open and ran full speed around the small cottage. The man was running across the lawn now and through a wooded area. London remembered those woods led back to the cottage, so he switched directions to cut the man off, betting the fucker was so high, he thought he was floating. London put his Glock away and took off running.

London was right. The man had just circled around. He was back in the front yard. He was probably confused, because he stopped for a second, did a three-sixty, twice, then kept going in the same direction.

London ran straight for the man and tackled him. London fell on top of the screaming man, elbowed him once in the mouth. The man winced, coughed, spat the blood on his tee-shirt. The man struggled to get up. London held the man down with a knee on his chest. The man realized he wasn't getting free and just gave up.

"Come on, man," he said in a tired voice. "Let me

go."

"Who are you?" London growled.

"Come on..."

"Who are you?!" London shouted, retrieved his Glock and pointed it at the man's nose.

The man hyperventilated. "I'm-I'm Chester, man... I swear I just made a mistake..."

"Okay, crackhead, why were you looking through that window?"

"I'm no crackhead... never touch the stuff..." London pressed his knee harder into his chest. Chester screamed. "Give me a break... please... I'll... I'll tell you..."

London eased up some. "Well?"

"I get a little high... Meth, man, makes me do things I shouldn't... okay. I... peep in houses sometimes. This lady who lives here... she has some nasty parties..."

"Did you see who else was here?"

"Man, I just saw you and another guy go in the house," Chester said. "I saw a jeep pull up, so I ran and hid in the woods. When I heard the jeep leave, I went to see what else was going on. Sometimes the lady has a lot of people in there doing each other...Come on, man. Can you let me up?"

"You know this jeep?"

"Yeah, yeah. The people who own it have a farm a mile or two from here. Weird people. I don't fuck with 'em unless they have orgies in the barn. Then I might watch. Come on! Let me up!"

"Show me this farm and I might score you some Meth later." London removed his knee from Chester and stood.

Chester sat up, his eyes focused on London and a huge smile came across his face. "Really?"

Of course not, you freak, London thought.

"Yeah," London said. "You help me, I'll help you."

"Hell yeah." Chester found some spring in his shoes. 'I can show their spread."

"Hold on." London waved Chester back. Chester turned and saw the Glock was poking him in the ribs. He swallowed hard. "You fuck with me and I'll blow a hole in you the size of the Grand Canyon. You understand, freak?"

"I ain't gonna do that," Chester fumbled his words. 'I'm a man of my word... are you?"

London smiled, placed his Glock in his holster. "Yeah," he said. "Sure I am."

4

They jumped into London's '73 Cougar. Chester felt the interior, and London smacked his hand.

"I don't know where your hand has been," London said. Actually he did know, and he definitely didn't want that smell plastered all over his new seats.

"I was just admiring..." Chester tried to explain.

"I don't want you admiring anything I own, Freak," London started the Cougar and span out of the thin small driveway, leaving behind gravel and dirt.

They passed by woods on both sides of the highway. No city lights, no mountains, and no ocean waves could be heard. No other houses for miles: at least ten miles. As a matter of fact, when London first tried to find the valley where Mya Stone lived, he drove by it several times. London and Chester found the dirt road that lead to the farm.

The Cougar eased up to a barn where flood lights lit up the scenery. Three jeeps and a Cadillac were parked near a series of six bungalows. London killed the lights on the Cougar as he pulled in behind a shrubbery. It didn't matter. He was sure the tires rolling across grass and gravel alerted someone.

He was right.

Three men in Gucci suits appeared, flashing shotguns and pistols. He knew instantly they were employed by Haze Deleguara. The man with the shaved head tapped on the window with the muzzle of his .38. London rolled the window down. In his other hand was a flashlight and the man kept shining it in London's face, then Chester's. He repeated three more times until London

said something.

"Keep shining that light in my face, baldy and you're going to eat that flashlight."

The man laughed. "Holy shit!" He nearly doubled over, laughed again. "I can't believe it's Barry London!"He waved the other two guys to the Cougar. "Fellas!" He called out. "The one and only, Barry fucking London! This moron did six years for a robbery of a vault at a lumberyard. Guess what? There was no money but plenty of cops!"

London opened the car door, which smashed the man in the ribs. The man dropped the .38 as he fell to his knees. London got out of the car, and hit the man square in the jaw. London quickly started the engine, placed the gear in drive and punched the gas pedal hard. The Cougar hit the man with the sawed-off shotgun. He fell on his back, pulled both triggers. The discharged the gun, taking both blasts to the face.

Chester screeched, threw his hands on the dashboard.

London swerved the car to avoid an apple tree. The other man with the shotgun pulled the trigger and one shell shattered the back window.

"Mother fucker!" London screamed over the top of Chester's screams. Now London was pissed. He'd just spent countless hours, days and weeks, not to mention thousands of dollars, to fix up the last vehicle his owned. He spun the car around and gunned it. The Cougar barreled toward the man who had now thrown the shotgun aside and fired a Walther. Two bullets struck the windshield. One barely missed London. The second struck Chester in the left arm.

Chester howled in pain.

The grill of the Cougar struck the man in the legs, jettisoned him in the air. The man landed on the hood of

the car, slid into the windshield. His face was pushed close to the glass, disfiguring his visage.

Chester screamed.

London took his Glock from the holster and jabbed the muzzle in the windshield where the man's face was glued to. He fired twice. Both bullet formed holes in the windshield as well as the man's.

Chester screamed.

"Shut up!" London ordered.

Chester was holding his arm, stifled his screams. He sobbed hard, watched the blood gush from the wound. London parked the Cougar, opened his door. He started to leave Chester, but had a change of heart. He removed a handkerchief from his jacket pocket, and wrapped it tightly around Chester's arm.

"No crying," London said. "If you want to live through this, follow my every direction. Then you can crawl back under the rock you came from and smoke Meth until your head explodes for all care. But for now, you will not deviate from any instruction. If you get me killed, I will come back and haunt your ass! Got it?"

5

"Oh God," Chester whined. "I can't handle anymore ghosts..."

Suddenly the Cougar was surrounded by a mob dressed in white T-shirts and white cargo pants. Most of the mob were men, the others were women. They all flashed an array of guns, some with heavy artillery, some stepping back into the past with Colts. A tall woman with short blond hair appeared, illuminated in the Cougar's headlights. It was apparent she ran the show. She walked toward the car like a Lioness taking survey of all she owned. No one challenged this Lioness. She was dressed in white as well, but the clothing was a wrap of sorts, was made of silk and hugged her slim, athletic build snugly.

London knew exactly who she was.

Anna Salvino.

Anna motioned for London to get out of the car. He shook his head no. Anna smiled. She gave her followers the sign to lower their weapons, then again urged London get out. London and Chester exchanged looks of concern. London opened the door and stepped out of the Cougar. Chester did the same, followed London until they met up with Anna.

"You have the money?" Her voice was choppy, direct, and could cut into a person like a hatchet.

London was thrown for a second. The money? That's what Haze's men were here for, London thought. They saw me and jumped to conclusions I was there to take the money from them. But what was the money for?

"Don't worry," Anna cooed. "You can have your boss back as soon as you hand over the two million."

For Haze? This was a kidnapping? A mob boss? London had never heard of a regular civilian committing such an act. How did they get away with it? He had bodyguards...

London saw Tomassi walk out the barn. Lalo Tomassi was Haze's number two man. Tomassi was the reason you didn't screw with Haze.

Pretty obvious that Tomassi was working with Anna. They approached each other and locked lips, not sexy at all or any kind of passion most people would understand. They brushed lips, kissed hard, which was actually just bearing down hard on each other's lower and top lip. London snickered. He didn't need Tomassi or Anna to explain further.

Tomassi and London had only met once, and Tomassi never saw London's face. London was running with a crew robbing gamblers. They robbed Tomassi after a dice game one late night about fifteen years ago.

"Yeah," London said. "I have the money," London turned to Chester, jabbed a thumb pointing to the other side of the barn. "Go get the money out of the Cadillac."

Nervously, Chester nodded, shuffled off. One of Anna's men followed. Five minutes of staring at each other, Chester returned with a duffle bag. Anna's man did not walk him back. Chester acted like he had something to tell London. London brushed him off. Chester handed the bag to London. London unzipped the bag and saw stacks of fifties and hundreds on top. He handed the bag to Tomassi.

"Last payment," Tomassi rifled through the bag. He was pleased with what he found. "I bet you were surprised I was involved," Tomassi said.

"Oh yeah," London wanted to hit the man for patting himself on the back. "Very clever of you to pull this off."

Tomassi stopped grinning. He handed the bag to another member of the cult. "I don't like your smart ass tone."

"I don't like your conniving face," London told him.

"Have we met before?" Tomassi chuckled, looked surprised by London's statement.

"Yeah, it was a few years ago, and I knew you couldn't be trusted back then," London said. "I robbed you and it was easy-peezy, just like this con you've pulled on Haze."

"I don't think so, punk. Nobody has ever robbed me. That had to be another guy."

"No, it was you, wearing the same clown outfit as today."

"Funny," Tomassi took a step closer. "I get the feeling you aren't who we think you are."

"It doesn't matter," London said. "I want to take the old man. You got your money, Benedict Arnold."

"Traitor to what? A mob boss? A man who cared about no one or nothing but himself? He didn't give two shits about his family, even less about his employees. Haze ain't what he used to be," Tomassi laughed. "Anna here, she broke him. Just like all the other sheep that follow this dumbass Enigma, or whatever he calls himself. They don't have a brain. And what Anna did to Haze," Tomassi shook his head. "Proves he didn't have either. Then again, I already knew that. I used to bend that fucker any way I wanted. Go ahead. Take the old man."

London pushed past Tomassi. He looked behind him and saw Anna had her cult standing in single file, giving them a pep talk or a speech. They looked like a militia, the way they were holding their guns. Something struck London as odd. He referred to Scarfe in the present.

So who the hell hit him over the head and took Mya?

6

London stepped inside the barn and saw Haze lying on the floor, dead from a bullet to the head. There was a shadow by one of the stables. London sighed, unsheathed his Glock from his holster. Quiet footsteps came from the stables and out of the shadows came Mya. Still naked, her body covered in dirt and mud, bloodstains on her face. She was pointing a .38 at London.

London noticed her arm was bleeding.

"What happened to your arm?"

Mya's eyes fluttered. She was racking her brain to remember.

"I brushed against the bathroom sink," Mya said. "Cut it."

"Mya," London spoke softly with an air of command. "Put the gun down."

"This isn't fun anymore," she said moving away from the stables. She knocked over some hay, which revealed some more weapons.

A few Barrett M 107s and a whole lot of Benelli M4 Super 90s.That one was a high powered shotgun. Fuckin-A, London thought. He shot a Super 90 last year. Talk about a weapon that could make a man cum in his pants. Or shit himself, if he wasn't prepared to fire it correctly.

"I know, Mya," London said. "The game is not fun anymore. Just... throw the gun away. I'll take you with me. Get you some help."

"I don't want any man helping me... they're all liars. They just use me."

"That man... that was in your tub. Who was he?"

"A computer programmer... I think," Mya was

confused. She thought hard. "A friend of Enigma's. He paid Enigma a lot of money to fuck me. I didn't like it very much."

London nodded. "I could see that. Enigma did that a lot, huh? Sold you and the girls from his inner circle?"

"I had to supplement my income," Chester said as he entered the barn. He was carrying the duffle bag. Chester laughed, shook his head. His face suddenly changed. He was more serious. His eyebrows furrowed, sank downward to his nose. His voice became deeper, no edge, calm as a gentle breeze. "Mya," he said, held a hand up. "Violence is not the way... not for you. You have too much love in your heart... You are the mother of all that is pure... no evil exists inside your heart, no hate, no anger in your DNA... you were cured by me... remember...?"

Mya listened to him. She lowered her gun. Dropped it to the ground. She fell to her knees, and wept.

A single bullet struck Scarfe in the back and exited his chest cavity. He cried out once, fell forward.

A loud voice coming from a bullhorn announced the ATF and FBI were there. London grabbed the duffle bag and ran to find a backdoor to the barn. There wasn't one, so he kicked out a lose board, making a hole in the wall just big enough to crawl through. He ran into the woods seconds before ATF and FBI agents stormed the farm. He stayed hidden in the hollow of a dead tree for hours until the helicopter above disappeared. Ten AM the next day, London hitchhiked his way back into the city, leaving his '73 Cougar. He wasn't worried about it. What was in the duffle bag could afford him a new one.

Mean Business

1

London had never been further south than Crabtree, Maryland, and that is so far north-east that it crowded New Castle, Pennsylvania. There he was, though, in Limewater, Georgia, sitting in a hillbilly bar, all eyes on him and Marty Stuart on the jukebox. One particular man in an Alabama baseball cap and Roll Tide T-shirt was very interested in London. He sat at the bar nursing a glass of beer, staring a hole in the back of London's head.

London was at a table, sitting across from Julip Havers, an associate of London's boss, Peter Choaladi. How a hick like Julip Havers got in business with a Cuban crime boss was beyond London.

Making money off of chop shops is nothing new for Choaladi and his cohorts. Choaladi has been in the business since the late 70's when his brothers set up in New Jersey. Stealing cars and selling them to chop shops all over the country makes the Choaladi family the darlings of the criminal world. So whenever any of his associates had problems, he lends Barry London out to take care of the problems.

"The fat one over there," Julip said. "By the jukebox talking to the blonde in the white dress."

"He knows where your brother is?" London asked, staring a hole in the large man with the long beard and body shaped like an oversized globe.

"Yep," Julip answered. "I'm pretty sure Barge Franklin. Those are his brothers, Colin, Rip, Feign, and Toss. I'm sure they helped Barge take Rook from the garage last Thursday. The mailman was watchin'."

"Who's the blonde?"

Julip shrugged. "Carla. Nobody special. Just some squeeze Barge sees sometimes."

"I guess I'll ask him a few questions." London stood.

"Wait!" Julip tugged on the sleeve of London's sports jacket. "You can't just go up to a Franklin and start asking him if he kidnapped somebody!"

"Who says I'll talk first?" London pulled away and ambled over to the fat main the black wife beater way too small for his robust body.

Just as London tapped the fat man on the shoulder, Julip called out the man's name. London turned and Julip was right behind him.

"Hey Barge," Julip sound. "Me and my friend wanna know if you got a minute to talk."

Barge grunted. His mouth worked overtime on a ball of chaw. He leaned to the side and spat out a long line of brown and black phlegm that wrapped itself around a stripper's pole.

"Fuck you want?" Barge said.

"Where's Julip's brother?" London wasn't going to waste time with niceties.

Barge or any of the other locals in the bar wasn't either. Barge's brothers decided they wanted to hear the conversation. Feign and Rip had pool sticks. Colin retrieved a claw hammer from his toolbox on the bar. Toss still had the knife he used to gut the fish he caught this morning. All four had the same scowl that plagued Barge's ugly face. They crowded around London and Julip, screwing in their tiny eyes and breathing heavy for effect.

"He's probably face down in a ditch, drunk and stoned out of his head," Barge said, barely raising his voice above a decimal human ears can detect. "I bet Julip didn't tell you Rook is a chicken head. Somebody better tell Rook

Meth can rot the brain."

London gave Julip a disappointed look. Julip looked away. London knew he still had to take of the situation or Choaladi would be disappointed in him. He returned his harsh gaze to Barge, who by now restarted his conversation with Carla. She made sure Barge looked at her tits. Everyone could see she had no bra on underneath that thin, white cotton dress.

"What a man does in the privacy of his own home is his business," London told him. Barge continued to ignore him. "There's witnesses that you and your inbred brothers took Rook from their garage."

Barge continued to ignore London. The blonde ran her hand through her hair and giggled. London noticed the woman had a cleft in her chin big enough to land an airplane. Barge's brothers stayed where they were, crowding Julip and London.

"Come on, London" Julip said in his lazy, slow accent. "This is a waste of time."

Barry London laughed. He unsheathed his Glock from his breast holster and fired at the closest man to him. The bullet went through the man's left shoe. He screamed, dropped the claw hammer and fell to the wood floor. A cloud of dust followed, either from the body of Barge's brother or from the floor. The other two scattered, hands over their ears, as Julip did the same.

Barge jerked his head around. Carla yelped, trotted to a corner of the bar.

"You... you shot Colin!" Barge screamed, in shock.

London put the barrel of his Glock to Barge's fat cheek and said, "I bet you'll talk to me now."

"I don't like bein' threatened!"Barge stated.

"I don't like being ignored, double stuff," London rattled off. His voice carried louder than the jukebox. "Start

talking, or I'll shave some fat off of you!"

"Okay," Barge said. Anxiety took over. His barrel chest heaved sporadically. "Let's take the conversation to the back." His eyes danced back and forth between London and his other two brothers. "Feign, Toss, help Colin to the backroom." Barge turned to the blonde and said, "Carla, looks like you're goin' to have to get another bullet out of Colin. He's like a magnet for those suckers." Barge laughed at his own joke as he waddled to the office behind the bar.

2

"We were paid to take Rook," Barge confessed. He reached over and turned the radio off.

Funny, London recognized the song and the singer. Texas Cookin' by Guy Clark. Pop is a big fan of Outlaw country. He has a stack of Vinyl records of Townes Van Zandt, Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson sitting side by side with James Brown and Curtis Mayfield. Pop works with Choaladi as well, running a newspaper stand to cover up the illegal gambling operation. Pop always liked being a surrogate father to London, as well as finding any info London needed to do the job. Pop missed his own sons. He didn't say, but London figured the three of them didn't chat often except holidays and birthdays. So when London asked Pop, AKA Leon Brown - a retired bus driver from Manhattan - why he listened to country music,: Pop's response was classic. "Music don't have color barriers, son," he said. "I like the way they sing, and boy they pick those guitars!"

London reached over Barge's messy desk and turned the radio back on. Barge didn't like that.

"I like that song," London smiled. The song ended and a commercial came on. London turned the radio off. "Who hired you?"

"Lou Stills," Barge said. "He has another chop shop in Kaye County. Stills never got along with your family," he said to Julip.

Julip nodded. "Goes back to our grandfathers and back when they used to race."

"What - like in Nascar?" London asked.

"Never got to that," Julip laughed. "Neither

Grandfather was that good. Just local stuff. Once they raced in Atlanta, but both washed out on that track. Track was dirt then. Both hit the wall, got out, and started throwin' punches right away. That was in the early sixties. Almost any rule was bent or broken. Both cars had been messed with."

London met with one of the brother's eyes. He was to trying stare London down. He must have seen something and got spooked. The man quickly looked down at his shoes.

"Where did you take Rook?" London asked Barge.

"Across the county. In Hopewell. There's an abandoned farm," Barge said nervously. "Look, man... we just did a job. That was all. I really don't dislike Julip... Rook, gets on my nerves some, but I ain't out to do nothin' bad to the Havers. Me and my brothers just did it for a thousand..."

London stood. Barge leaned back in his chair, his eyes as big as his belly. He drew in a frightened breath with his gaping mouth. His brothers took a few steps back. Julip was well prepared to fall on the floor and bury his face in the blood and cum-stained carpet. London took his wallet from the breast pocket of his jacket.

The stress level in the room returned to normal, except for the smell of warm urine. London smiled and wondered which one of them was afraid of him. His guess was Julip. But he should already know he wasn't going to hurt him because of ties to Choaladi. London removed several twenties from the black billfold and counted out a thousand dollars. He laid them out on the desk.

"Take me to that farm," London said. "The money is yours. If any blood is spilled, and you guys survive, you get another thousand."

3

The farm was three counties over and a mile from swampland. No one had farmed on that land for decades. The house had weeds and grass reaching the second floor. All the windows were busted out and the walls on the back of the house had become non-existent. The four barns had definitely been in use. Most likely for various criminal activities over those several decades; London just knew of the hidden 'hot cars' and one barn used for storing weed.

They all rode in Barge's Silverado pickup. Barge drove and London sat in between him and Julip, with the three brothers in the bed, with their rifles and shotguns out in the open. London thought that was the dumbest thing he'd ever seen until he saw three or four other trucks on the freeway with men in the bed of a pickup with shotguns clinging to them. A cultural shock, no doubt, but a humorous education. Just like he learned that Barge could kill a twelve pack all by himself and still be a competent driver.

He nearly hit a tree once.

An elderly man in a stained STP cap and a silk blue shirt came out of the second barn. He removed a paper towel that had been tucked in the lapels of his shirt. He chewed feverishly, wiped his mouth with that paper towel, and then discarded it. Fifteen more men followed, all cradling shotguns, rifles or flashing pistols. That young blonde from the bar, this time she was wearing jeans and Run-DMC T-shirt.

Barge screwed down his mean eyes and uttered an expletive that women usually take offense to. From the

elderly man's stance and over confidence, London gathered the man was Lou Stills. London's eyes met with Julip's. Julip was shaking. London sighed. He was hiding something. London wasn't sure when he met with Julip, he just had a feeling.

Now he was sure.

"Get out," London ordered Julip. Julip hesitated, opened the car door. "Hey," London pulled on Julip's pants leg, Julip sat still momentarily. "Speak to Stills and no one else. Tell him why we're here. And don't let your fucking voice tremble. Got it?"

Julip drew in a breath and strained to let it back out.

"Okay," he hiccupped, got out of the car.

Julip wasn't given a chance to say anything. A gun was fired and a single bullet pierced his forehead. Julip yelped. He kept his mouth open and as wide as his traumatized eyes. A trickle of blood ran down his face before he fell to the ground. Lou Stills had hate in his eyes. He was screaming at his men to fire.

"Go! Go! Go!" London screamed at Barge and ducked in the seat.

The truck spun around and Barge's brothers opened fire. A barrage of bullets sharply assaulted the truck. The brothers in the bed of the truck kept the battle going, even though all three were struck. Two of Stills men were eliminated. As soon as Barge got good length between Stills and his men, the truck slammed into a barn on the far left.

Everything went black.

4

"That was some mean business, there," London heard someone say. A voice that sounded like it had been run through blender followed by laughter. He opened his eyes and saw Lou Stills hovering over the truck, his men standing behind him. At some point London must have opened the door on the passenger side and passed out again. There were massive waves of pain in his forehead. He felt blood running down his face.

London looked over at the driver's side. Barge was dead. A wooden plank fell from the ceiling of the barn when the truck slammed into the front of the makeshift building, which was built three or four decades ago and built too swiftly. The wooden plank went through the windshield and tore into Barge's face. Blood had splattered not only all over the seat and dashboard, but soaked the left side of London's jacket.

London moved his hand slowly, felt for the Glock. It was gone.

"Looking for this?" Stills showed him the gun, holding it by the muzzle. "You really think we're dumb hillbillies, huh?"

"A picture... is... worth... a thousand... words..." London managed to say. "Looks like you're selling... the image very well... No... I don't think that... I think you make dumb mistakes."

"Mister, I don't know you, you don't know me. My boys here tried to convince me to kill you without caring who you are," Stills shook his head. "I ain't like that. But you attacked us."

"No sir," London said, his senses coming back to

him quicker the more he blinked his eyes. "You shot Julip Havers."

"I damn for sure shot him!" Stills screamed. "He defiled my little girl! He and his brother Rook! And when I find him..."

"Wait. You don't have Rook Havers? That was the whole reason we came here. You paid Barge and his brothers to bring Rook to you..."

"Why would I do that?" Stills spat in the opposite direction, wiped his mouth. "I have my boys for that sort of thing! Mister, I think you got took."

"I think we both did," London said. "My boss is not going to be happy about this."

"Just who in the hell are you?" Stills demanded.

"I'm Barry London. Peter Choaladi sent me to resolve this matter."

Stills thought about it. His snarl became broader, but confusion set in his eyes. "Now, why would Peter Choaladi be dippin' his toes in my waters? I'm protected by Leon Gershom."

That part London didn't know. He did know Choaladi and Gershom were friends. Never a sore word between them and a hostile takeover of either's business concerns would never happen. Unless someone was trying to take over the business themselves.

"Look, I don't know you, true," London said. "I'm pretty certain Rook and Julip Havers had plans to get everyone involved killed, and both chop shops would be theirs. I bet there was a deal with Barge and his family to kill you and your family. But I bet they had help. Can I speak to your daughter?"

Stills' eyes lit up red. His lower lip flubbed for thirty seconds, then went right back into a nasty snarl. "My daughter is dead. June killed herself last month," Stills said.

Oh shit, London thought. I just put my foot in my mouth.

"Throw him in the Arbus house," Stills commanded.

The boys exchanged glances. Nervous energy filled their bodies. There was the shuffling of feet and exchanging guns from one hand to the other. None of the boys jumped at the chance to be at their daddy's beck and call on this incident. Finally, one spoke up,

"You sure about that..."

"What did I just say?!" Stills barked. "Now you all just git! Do as I say!"

"Come on," London tried. "I didn't know anything about your daughter or what these creeps were up to..."

London caught the butt of a rifle and it sent him to La la land.

5

London woke up. He rubbed the blurriness from his eyes, feeling a piece of hay sticking in his ear. He sat up, looked around. The whole floor of the barn was made up of hay. Old hay from the looks of it. All of it brown, smelling sour.

London heard movement under the hay. He followed the moving strands all the way to his feet. What the hell could that be? Mice? Rats? Bugs of some kind? He didn't know. London was a city dweller. His only contact was hayride when he was fourteen and Mandy Von Bara sat on his lap while he copped a feel.

He heard the hissing.

Ohhhh shit, London thought. A snake is in here.

London hated snakes. Again, he was not used to the country and all of the creatures that coexist with everyone else. One bored night, London watched a program on American snakes. This would be a test of what he learned, since he watched the show two or three years ago.

The snake popped his head up. Bright orange patterns surrounded the snake's head. A corn snake, London remembered them being called. Harmless. Used to cut down rat and other pests population. London let out a sigh of relief when the corn snake slithered away from him toward another bale of hay.

As soon as he felt a moment of comfort, he heard other sighs. Then more slithering. Suddenly, the entire floor of hay began to move, and soon the other inhabitants showed who they were and what snake kingdom they came from. Copperhead. Pinewoods Snake. Pygmy Rattler. Eastern Diamondback. Red Belly Snake.

The Diamondback popped up on the left side of London's face. The Diamondback's face was at his cheek, tongue slipping in and out. London stayed still. His heart was beating so fast he felt the vibrations in his toes. He fought the urge to piss himself. London kept his eyes straight ahead, not blinking. He felt the snake's dry, scaly skin crawl across his face, slither down his neck and across his belly, and to an old tractor tire.

Why the hell were there so many different kinds in here?! London panicked in his head. He didn't know if he said that out loud or just thought it.

"Because my cousin used this barn to study snakes for his Doctrine at the University Georgia State," Carla stood in the doorway. "He don't study no more. Lou shot him for smokin' the Meth he was supposed to be selling."

"That's a helluva story, lady. But can you get me the fuck out of here!" London said. He tried to contain his fear and nervousness, but his voice betrayed him.

Carla laughed, snorted. "Just stand up and walk out."

"I don't want to get bit," London told her.

"I walked in, didn't I? And I'm barefoot."

Sure enough, Carla had no shoes on. Her feet were almost suntanned like the rest of her, and for some reason, paleness collided with the tan and made her pink toenails stand out.

"Just take a chance," Carla said. "Fifty-fifty you won't get bit I'll leave you here to die. Hmph! You got shoes on."

London decided to put his fears in his back pocket and decided to tempt it. He stood slowly, and paced his steps as if he didn't care what was crawling on the hay floor. Luckily, he didn't step on any snakes.

Carla stepped out of the barn door. London

followed, saw one of Lou Stills' boys and pushed Carla to the ground. She fell with a whimper, rolled to the right side of the barn behind a hedge. London dropped to his belly and crawled to her. He gripped her neck and squeezed just enough.

"You scream," London whispered. "I'll break your neck. Nod if you understand."

Her blue eyes were wide and wild. She bobbed her head up and down quickly, those blonde tresses did the same. She wasn't out of danger yet. London squeezed again to make a point. He had one more demand.

"Get me out of here. Nod your head if you understand."

Carla swallowed back loud sobs, and nodded.

London removed his hand from her neck. Her chest heaved until her breathing became normal. She sat up, slowly pointed to an old beat up, grey Sierra pickup with a white shell. No one was around the vehicles. Carla stood, took a few steps to wait for London to get to his feet. She ran to the truck and opened the driver's side. She let London hop in first, before slamming the door.

One of Lou Stills' boys waddled over. He was big and thick bearded, armed with an assault rifle. Curiously, he wore a Roll Tide T-shirt and an Alabama cap. He lived in Georgia. Why didn't he represent the Bulldogs? London ducked to the floorboard and the blonde tossed a blanket over him.

"Where you goin', Carla?" he asked.

Carla turned the charm on. She stuck her tits out, smiled big and sighed. "Lou wants some chicken," she tossed her hair out of her eyes. "Guess I'm goin' to Wendell's super store."

"Well, alright! Can you get a batch with Sriracha on it?"

"You got it, Alva," Carla fluttered her eyes.

The man's eyes fell from her face to her heaving breasts under that white cotton dress. He began to salivate. She felt a smack on her ankle. That was definitely a signal from London to drive on and quit flirting.

"Well," Carla giggled. "I'll git. Chicken and Pabst blue ribbon coming up!" She turned the ignition, the pickup sputtered, then roared. She moved the gear shift to Drive and hit the gas. The pickup sped off down the wooded lane, kicking up gravel behind it.

6

London and Carla ended up on a dirt road headed into a deep wooded area. Twilight was setting in. Tree frogs and Cicada sang their songs loud and clear, in different sides of the speaker, one on the left, the other on the right. Bats fluttered close to the windshield, glided away from imminent death. Neither had spoken for thirty minutes. London decided it was time he found out some things.

"Are you kin to Lou Stills?" London blurted out.

"No," Carla shook her head. "I was his daughter in law for a few months. I was married to his oldest son, Gregory. Greg wanted out. I wanted out. We were going to get out. He joined the Marines. He went to boot camp in California. I went too, San Diego. Greg was sent off to Afghanistan and got himself killed. Mortar attack. Had no real chance of getting out." She looked at London, full of hate, regret, all rolled into one glance. "Back to being country folk."

"Why?" He asked. His eyes stayed level with the road in front, never once drifting to Carla.

"Why what?"

"Why would Rook fuck with Lou Stills? Why would Julip get Choaladi mixed up in a hogtying contest between inbreeds?"

"We're not inbreeds, mister," Carla's nostrils flared. "We're country folk."

"You are not country folk. Don't bullshit me," London said. Slowly, his eyes moved over to Carla. His glare was colder than Antarctica. "You are not the cast of Andy Griffith show. This area is not Mayberry. You deal in Meth and stolen vehicles."

"There is no other industry..." Carla tried to apologize. London wasn't having it.

"I don't care what side you are on! Just don't put me on! I've been in this game for years, lady!" London screamed. "I know the stakes. I know poverty as well as you do. Don't ever try to make believe to me you, Rook, or Stills is normal!"

They were quiet now. Another couple of minutes, London started up again.

"What was the plan you, Rook, and Julip had?"

Carla sighed. "We wanted in on his Meth business. Julip wanted the chop shop. We paid Barge to take Rook. Julip called your boss, hoping Choaladi would send foot soldiers to take Lou Stills apart," she said, shrugged. "He sent you instead. Well... Julip fucked things up."

"He had sex with Still's daughter. Okay. So what? I think he over reacted--"

"She was fourteen, London. Fourteen years old," Carla said. "To make it worse, Julip put it on a website. That's how Lou found out. That's why he was scared to go with you."

London nodded. "I knew he had something to hide."

"Don't we all," Carla said.

7

On the horizon was a cabin stuck behind brush. Carla eased the pickup to the right side of the cabin, just beside a hollowed out tree bent over backwards. London heard movement from the bushes. Before he could react, the barrel of a Walther PPK was in his face. London whispered expletives to himself and heard the man laugh.

"You idjit," Alva said. "Get out. Nice and slow." Alva opened the door for him, waved the pistol as if he was using his hand to usher London out.

Alava moved the gun up and tried to come down on London's neck. London was pistol whipped before, so he knew the move. When Alva's arm came down, London grabbed it. Next, he kneed Alva in the crotch and pushed him into a tree. London stripped the gun from him, then gave him a combination of rights and lefts to the midsection.

Out of breath, and damn tired of the whole ordeal, London shoved the pistol in Alva's face and was a half of a second off pulling the trigger. He heard a shrill scream from Carla. Begging came next.

"Please... please don't! Oh God!" She sobbed, ran from the driver's side of the pickup and threw herself between Alva and the gun.

"Get the fuck out of the way!" London yelled.

Carla pushed the Walther away. "You can't kill him! Please... no, London, you can't kill Alva!"

"I said get the fuck out of the way, or I'll spread your brains all over this cabin wall, bitch!!"

"You can't kill him," she wept hard, pulling Alva's face to hers. Her voice was muffled when she said. "We're

going to have a baby. We're going to have a baby..."

London sighed, looked away. "Fuck," he whispered.

"Don't tell him about the money... just... don't tell him about the money..." A thick Georgia accent cut through the noise the cicadas were making.

A very thin, bearded man with black curly hair appeared from the cabin door. He was just wearing stained biker shorts and no shirt. He looked like he hadn't bathed in days. The man had nervous energy and wild eyes.

"Shut up, Rook!" Alva screamed at the man.

"Go back in the cabin." Carla left Alva lying on the ground to help the gangly man back inside.

London cut his eyes at Alva, bright red embers burning hot.

"What money?" London asked.

Alva picked himself off the ground, shook his head. "There ain't no money," Alva smiled.

London smacked him across the face with the pistol. Alva cried out.

"What money?" London repeated the question.

Alva just shook his head. London smacked him again with the pistol, this time in the throat. Alva fell backwards on the ground, coughing. London stood over him, ready to shoot if the question was not answered.

"What fucking money?"

"We... we... we've been skimming from Stills and your boss," Alva's vocal chords strained to form the sentence.

"You morons live a dangerous lifestyle. So, if you were never caught, I highly doubt that scenario, but if you weren't, that wouldn't be enough for you? You have to take over both businesses? Fucking morons."

"Stills knows someone is doing it," Alva stood, a hand caressing his neck. He still struggled to speak in

between coughs. "He knows Carla is involved and someone else from his troop. He doesn't know who."

"What about the deal with Lou Stills daughter?" London asked.

"We didn't expect that to happen," Alva said. He coughed, and shrugged. "We didn't think she'd kill herself. Shit... we were hopin'... hopin' the shame would be too much for Stills and..."

A single gunshot shrieked across the night sky. Alva didn't finish his sentence. He and London were caught off guard, London more than him.

"I-I-had to do it," they heard Carla say.

London turned to find the sound and Alva jumped him. The pistol fell to the ground, bounced a few times and slid under the cabin.

Alva kicked London in the ribs. London fell to his knees. Alva then kicked London in the mouth. London fell on his back, rolled toward the cabin.

London put his hands on the cabin wall and pulled himself up. Two scythes were leaning against the cabin wall. Laughing, Alva stormed London. London took hold of one of the scythes, swung at Alva the same time he dove for London. Alva fell on his face. The scythe shredded the back of his T-shirt. One long cut appeared on Alva's back, blood ran down his jeans. Alva stood quickly, took hold of the other scythe. He swung a few times, London backed up.

"Boy, you don't know what trouble you're in now!"Alva said excitedly. "I've used one of these since I was four years old!"

Alva charged London. London swung, barely missed Alva. Alva sideswiped London, slicing through his coat sleeve. A gash appeared on his forearm and blood drained to his wrist. He had no time for the pain or worry

about the blood.

Alva swung again and London ducked. He pulled the nub end of the scythe and poked Alva in the ribs. Alva yelped, staggered backwards. London saw Carla's hand holding a .32 snub nose. London jerked back just in time and the gun fired. The bullet zipped past him. Without a thought to it, London swung full force.

The blade of the scythe sliced through Carla's wrist, severing the hand that still held the .32.

Carla let out a high pitched squeal, fell to her knees. London watched without remorse. But he temporarily forgot about Alva. He turned and swung his scythe, catching nothing but air. Alva was lying on the ground, the bullet that whizzed by London had caught him square in the forehead, making a black, bloody dot. London averted his eyes back to Carla, who was now curled up in a fetal position. She was holding her bloody stump with her left hand, weeping hard.

"Hey!" London screamed at Carla. "Where's Rook?"

At first, Carla didn't answer and London repeated the question. "He's dead," she whined. "Dead. Dead. Deaaaaaaaad!!!!!" She snarled at London and said, "I had to kill him… he was useless!!!

Carla tried to close her eyes. London pushed her with the tip of his shoe. "Uh-uh! Open your eyes!" He pushed her again and she did what she was told. "I want you to see this!" London walked over Alva. He raised the scythe high over his head and brought the blade down hard. A large gash stretched Alva's head from his neck. A second swipe, took it completely off.

Carla cried out. The scream pierced the hot night air.

8

The pickup pulled up in the driveway of the farm and parked next to Stills' vehicles. Stills came out of the farmhouse and stood on the gravel drive, rifle aimed at the pickup. His men backed him, shotguns and assault rifles targeting the same vehicle. Stills lowered his rifle slightly when he saw Carla in the passenger's seat bawling, clinging her bandaged stump to her chest. London got out on the driver's side, with his hands in the air. One hand clenched a pillow case, which looked like it had a soccer ball inside.

"Don't shoot!" London called out. He eased around the pickup, indicating he was not armed by showing the inside of his coat.

"The fuck do you want, city-boy?" Stills said.

"I have something for you. Plus, I brought her back." London told him.

"Why in the hell would you think I want her back?"

"One thing I've learned about you Lou Stills, is you are very family oriented. I don't give a shit what you do with her. But the baby, I think you should keep it."

"Baby? She's with child?"

"Yeah..." London looked at Carla and snarled. "She's carrying Alva's child. Get out of the fucking truck!" he demanded.

Carla slowly got out, walked two paces and collapsed. One of Stills men took her and forced her into the farmhouse.

"I'll be damned," Stills spit his wad of chew out. The dark black tobacco stained the patch of grass beside him. "What do you have in the sack, city-boy?"

London chuckled. He tossed the pillow case at Stills

feet. "Your problem solved!" He got in truck. He started the engine, hit the gas. The pickup roared and slid backwards. "Courtesy of Peter Choaladi!"

London put the gear in drive and the pickup sped off.

The Good Place

1

As they came closer to the farm house, London and Dell saw a minivan that had the license plate 3POTT parked sideways in front of Martz farmhouse. That minivan looked familiar. London remembered he'd seen it at the café earlier. The minivan roared past Dell and London, a barrage of bullets zipped by the car. A small boy leaned out of the backseat window, firing an Uzi. London had no time to scream or yell at Dell, he grabbed the young man and pulled him to the floorboard just as bullets ripped through the windshield and out the back window.

***

POP: Son? Where are you?

LONDON: I'm here, in the city. Why?

POP: Choaladi is very angry with you, son. You missed a 10am meeting. That's not like you.

LONDON: I've had some business to take care of. I'll be there soon.

POP: I'll tell him.

Loretta sat the phone down on the car seat. The wind from the moving cars blew her blonde tassels in her face. She moved her patch side to side, then back over her left eye. She didn't want to stop. She didn't really want to jack that guy of his '73 Cougar, but Henry wanted it.

What Henry wants, Henry gets.

"Okay," she said. "I answered the texts."

"Hmm," Henry thought about that. He adjusted his thick glasses, then moved a finger over several zits that were stationed on his round face like pushpins on a map.

"You sure that was the right thing to do, Mom?"

Loretta shrugged. "I don't know," she said. "I don't care, baby. As long as you're happy. That's all that matters."

2

London crawled out of the ditch off of route 15. He stumbled and fell to his knees. Cars zipped by, not even wondering why a man in ragged clothes, bleeding from his left temple, was trying to walk down the road. London picked himself up, rubbed his blurry eyes, and propped himself against a telephone pole. He reached for his cigarettes, found the pack was missing.

"Shit," London said. "What kind of people would steal a man's cigarettes?"

London saw a building standing in an otherwise empty lot. The sign out front indicated the building was a café and the business was named 'The Good Place' and they served the best burger in America. He walked a hundred paces avoiding oncoming traffic. Stumbling most of the way, London noticed a fat, unhappy family of three staring at him. They were standing next to a caramel-colored Minivan with the license plate Tusk.

The family was dressed like tourists. The father wore a Hawaiian shirt, shorts and a Jacksonville Jaguars cap. The Mother wore a tank top, her extremely large breasts were hanging out. London noticed they were strangely perky and not saggy at all. She also wore a plaid mini-skirt way too small for her expanding waistline. The boy was no older than ten or so, wore a faded Rush T-shirt, and London doubted the boy even knew who Rush was. The boy's hair draped down to the nape of his neck, the ends braided. The mother held her robust son close to her, while the father barked at them to get in the car.

The fat woman and her fat little boy did as they were told, quickly, as if they were in danger.

"Goddamn bums," the fat man muttered.

London smiled. He turned to the fat man, chuckled. "Can I get a buck from you, kind man? For a candy bar or somethin'...?"

"Get the fuck outta here," the fat man screamed.

London stopped smiling. He took a step toward the man and the fat man jumped in the Minivan, immediately started the engine. London chuckled.

The parking lot was dirt and grass. He noticed only four cars were parked in the front. Three of those cars were the same as yesterday. One most likely belonged to the cook and owner of the café. The other one was the daytime waitress. London saw her get in and drive off at four twenty-five yesterday evening. The other two cars, a lime green Tundra and a white minivan, he didn't see yesterday.

He opened the screen door and stepped inside the café. The atmosphere felt wrong. The air conditioning was sputtering and there was a strong smell of death about the place. Blood splattered the first two booths. An old man sat in one booth, his face on the table, the top of his head blown completely off.

In the booth next to him was another man and woman in their Sunday best, both with two bullet holes in their face and chest. The waitress was sprawled out on the floor between the counter and the kitchen, a hole in her back indicated a shotgun had caused the wound. The cook was behind the counter, lying on his side with two bullets in his face.

Several tiny yellow pills laid on the wood countertop, along with the Cook's blood and brain matter.

London swallowed hard. He turned on his heels and ran out of the cafe, using his elbows to push the screen door open. He ran toward route 15, crossing one lane, when a Prius tapped him with its front bumper. London

fell and rolled a few times out of the road. A tall, light-skinned black man got out of the Prius and called out to London.

"Hey! You okay?!" The man ran to London, stooped over him. "I'm real sorry... I... I didn't see you..."

London caught his breath. He shook off the surging pain in his right hip, tried to stand. The man helped him up.

"Hey, dude, maybe you should go to a hospital..."

"No," London barked. "No, no hospital. I'm okay. I'm okay."

"Really, I think you need a doctor," the man said.

"Tell you what I need, I need a ride," London said.

"Well, I... I guess I can do that." The man helped London to his Prius, opening the passenger's door for him. "I mean, since I hit you with my car and all..."

"What's your name?" London interrupted.

The man wasn't sure if he should tell London or not. Finally he blurted out: "Dell."

London nodded his head. "Dell. My name is Barry. Can you do me a favor?"

"Yeah... sure... I guess," Dell helped London in the car.

"Shut the fuck up and drive." London slammed the door.

3

Henry and Loretta stopped at a rest area in Barahamsville. The place was completely empty, which was odd. No cars even passed through on the main highway. Loretta sat on the front steps of the Welcome building, where a traveler could use the bathroom, get information, or snacks from the machine. The building was small, made of brick with Plexiglas all around it.

She was smoking a cigarette, thinking of the good times she had with Marvin. How she met him at school. A lot of people were mad at her for starting up the relationship. They were even madder when she stayed with Marvin even after he robbed that convenience store and served a year. Of course everyone said to think about Henry's wellbeing, and Loretta tried; but when you're in love, you're in love and you're stuck like a fly in flypaper.

Loretta was not happy. She missed Marvin. But she didn't miss the wallops he gave her. She had to get out of the relationship anyway she could. Even if that meant carjacking someone. Well, Henry had to be safe. Their Focus died on route 15 at one thirty in the morning. She waved down the '73 Cougar and that's when Henry pulled a .38 on the man. The man rushed Henry and he had to shoot him. The bullet grazed the left side of the man's forehead. He fell and rolled into a ditch. Loretta and Henry sped off in the Cougar.

If only Marvin would have taken his medicine, everything would have worked out. He would not have gotten angry at the café and the owner wouldn't have kicked the three of them out. When the owner threatened to call the cops, Marvin promised he'd come back for him.

Damn that Marvin, for breaking up the family again. Loretta flicked the cigarette butt on the pavement. She hadn't noticed she'd smoked it all the way to the filter. Now she had a bad taste in her mouth.

"Henry?"

"What?" He wasn't paying attention to her. He was busy looking through the Cougar's trunk, finding an old John Denver Vinyl record, tossing it over his shoulders and rifling through a bag of newly-purchased clothes, tossing them over his shoulder.

"Go get Mama a Sprite," Loretta said in her syrupy baby voice.

"No," Henry said.

"Why, baby? Don't you love your Mama?"

"No," Henry goaded Loretta,

"Please... baby... Mama has a sicky tummy. And Mama is very sad."

"Mama can suck an egg!"

"Henry! Don't ever talk to me like that! Wait until I tell Daddy..."

Henry had found a loaded sawn-off shotgun under a duffle bag. He immediately pointed it at Loretta. "Daddy will never talk to you!"He screamed. "I will protect you from him from now on!"

Loretta's heart sank. Her baby boy was all grown up. Doesn't matter about age. Doesn't matter that Henry was only fourteen. Doesn't matter at all. She rushed to Henry, her more-than- ample breasts led the rest of her chunky body to her son. She pulled him to those breasts and smothered him. He tried to pull away and Loretta pushed his face back into her chest, held him there.

"Oh, I love you more than life itself, Henry," she cooed.

"Mom," Henry protested, his voice was muffled in

Loretta's Virginia is for Lovers T-shirt. Finally he pulled away. He backed up, then trotted forward. "Fuck," he let out an elongated gasp. "Mom! Look!"

Henry pointed at the duffle bag full of cash wrapped with paper bands.

4

"Where are we going?" Dell asked.

"Just keep driving," London said. "When you get to Armistead Road, turn left. There's going to be a farm."

"Uh, okay."

"You have a phone?"

"Yeah," Dell took out a slender square piece of plastic with a Spiderman case. "I couldn't get reception earlier. Maybe you can."

"I just have to make one phone call," London explained. "I'll pay you for the call, the gas, and your time when I get some money."

"Okay," Dell kept his eyes on the road. "Look... I know it's none of my business... but... what happened to you."

London hesitated. He wasn't sure he wanted to tell Dell anything. He did, however, feel like confiding in someone. He was angry, but kind of hurt too. He stopped to help this woman and her teenage son. He genuinely cared that these people needed help. They turned on him. Maybe the bullet grazing his head jarred something. Normally, London wanted to get even with those who did him wrong. This time he wanted an explanation and an apology, which he knew wouldn't get.

"I was robbed," London said. "They took my car... a car my old man gave me... took my belongings. I'm a little bit pissed."

"Oh my God! That's an understatement, I'm sure." Dell sighed. "You don't have to pay me."

"We'll see when this is all over. Pull over," London said. "I have to make this call now."

Dell pulled the car to the side of the road, beside a bank. London got out of the car, slammed the door behind him. London fiddled with the phone until he understood how to dial one of the many burners Pop had at his desk. The line popped and fizzled before it began to buzz. London waited several minutes until Pop answered.

Pop wasn't London's father, but he might as well have been. When London joined Choaladi's outfit as a younger man, Pop, Leon Brown, would advise London as well as all the other younger guys working for Choaladi. One by one, they all fell by the wayside. Either they went to jail for life, or ended up six feet underground. London was the only one to listen to Pop.

Pop was in the middle of another call from Libby, an old lady down the street. She wanted to place a bet on the Knicks. Pop did that for Peter Choaladi. Taking bets while using a newspaper stand and used bookstore. No matter how bad or good the teams were, Libby always put three or four bets on the Knicks and the Giants.

"Uh, Libby. I have to go. I have a phone call on another line."

Pop hung up the land line and answered the burner.

"Yes?" That was Pop's whothehellareyou voice.

"Pop, it's Barry."

"Son! Here are you? You know, I've been calling..."

"I'm okay, I'm okay, Pop..."

"I was so relieved when you answered my text..."

"What? I didn't text you," London said.

"What? Yes... yes you did."

"Pop, I don't have my phone. There's no way... shit. They answered you. I bet they thought I was dead."

"Who thought you were dead?"

"I'll explain, Pop. Hold on..."

"Hey, you better not come back here, right now.

Choaladi is furious with you!"

"I'm sure he is," London said. "Pop, I lost the money."

"You lost the money? Oh hell, son. That doesn't sound like you at all," Pop said.

"I was robbed. They took the Cougar, the guns. My fucking phone." An idea came to London. Pop took a shine to a young autistic man named Kenny. Pop met Kenny when the man asked for a copy of 'Something wicked this way comes', and after their brief conversation, Pop asked if the man wanted a job. Kenny cleans the bookstore and watches the newspaper stand when Pop runs out for coffee. Of late, Choaladi has been using Kenny's skills with computers to do some IT work.

Smart move, since he's always paranoid about who's watching him, or listening.

"Listen, Pop... I need you to get Kenny and have him track my phone. Maybe I'll find the money."

"I can do that. He's here now putting away a new shipment of paperbacks. What are you going to do about Martz?"

"I'm going to see him now," London said.

"Be careful, son. That man is crazy," Pop said.

"Yeah," London sighed. "Lately that's all that I've been running into. Something else happened."

"Oh yeah?"

"I went back to the café where I met with Martz. Place had been shot up. Owner and Waitress were dead. Two other customers."

"You think Martz did that?" Pop asked.

"I don't know, Pop. He's pretty crazy," London sighed. "Flies off the handle. Maybe he asked questions they didn't have the answers to."

"Maybe so, son. Barry, I have to go. Choaladi heard

you called. He wants to talk to you," Pop said, chuckled. "Now's not the time for you to speak to him. Can I ring you at this phone number?"

"Yeah. Talk to you later."

London hung up, got back in the car. "I need to hold on to your phone for a few hours. Waiting for an important..."

"Of course," Dell said. He started the car, eased it up on the highway. "Whatever you need."

5

"Mom? I don't think we should be at Marvin's house," Henry said. He picked his nose and wiped the yellow booger on his pants leg.

"We're just going to stay the night, baby; get our things and leave in the morning."

"Mom... you're hoping he'll come here tonight. You two will make up... everything will go back to normal. Only the normal is he bullies us."

Loretta stood at the front door, unlocked it. She opened the door and turned to her son.

"Henry, baby. You really don't understand about love."

"Mom, you're being irrational."

Loretta raised her right hand and smacked Henry across his left check. The violent outburst was so severe and hard, it caused his glasses to fly off his face. A large, red handprint formed on Henry's cheek. He didn't know what else to do but weep.

"I am still your Mother no matter how old you are. You will always respect me. Never, ever talk to me as if I am your child. Do you understand me, Henry?"

Henry nodded in between sobs.

"Good," Loretta cooed, stroked the boy's cheek. "Let's get something to eat, baby. I'm starving."

6

London and Dell passed through the gates of the farm unmolested. The SUV belonging to Martz' guards was filled with holes. As Dell's car drove by, London's heart sank into the pit of his stomach. Dell saw the look on London's face and hit the brakes.

"Uh," he chuckled nervously. "We shouldn't be here? Huh?"

"No," London answered. "But I need to see what has happened."

"Even though the person or persons responsible for this might be there," Dell said. "You need confirmation of what you already know."

"Yeah," London shrugged. "Humans are like that."

They rode through the long lane, magnolia trees with long limbs hung over either side. Three dead men lay on the ground. London recognized the wounds. One man was killed by a shotgun, the other two with an automatic rifle of some kind. The way the bullets were spread, London was thinking an Uzi or machine gun of some sort.

As they came closer to the farm house, London and Dell saw a minivan with the license plate 3POTT parked sideways in front of Martz' farmhouse. That minivan looked familiar. London remembered he'd seen it at the café earlier. The minivan roared past Dell and London, a barrage of bullets zipped by the car. A small boy leaned out of the backseat window, firing an Uzi. London had no time to scream or yell at Dell, he grabbed the young man and pulled him to the floorboard just as bullets ripped through the windshield and out the back window.

The Minivan sped off.

London rose up, dusted glass from his shoulders. Dell was hunched over, sobbing quietly. London brushed glass from Dell's back. He wanted to pat him on the shoulder and tell him everything was alright. Fuck that, London thought. He could be a man and accept the situation, move on. No one ever told London it would be alright.

Dell's cell phone rang. London retrieved it from his jean pocket.

"Yes?" London answered.

"Son?"

"Pop, yeah it's me."

"Don't go to Martz."

"I'm here already," London said.

"Oh, shit, Barry."

"Oh shit is right, Pop. The weirdest thing. A Minivan was just here. I think they killed those people at that café."

"What about Martz?"

"I can see him on his porch now. He's got three bullet holes in his chest. He's not moving."

"Okay, Barry," Pop said. "Get out of there. Ramirez is pissed he didn't get his share of Martz' money. That minivan belongs to a family, the Potters. Ramirez employs them to cleanup his messes."

"Kenny locate my phone?"

"Yeah. But here's the thing, son. There's a locator in the bag of money."

"Choaladi didn't tell me that," London sputtered.

"He didn't know, Barry. Look, I have the address... but so do the Potters."

"Good," London said. "Payback is a bitch."

7

They headed south on route 15, just past Barahamsville. London decided to take the SUV and a few guns. He had to remove Martz' bodyguards from the vehicle. Dell was still shaken up. He wouldn't even leave his car until London made him get out. London drove as Dell sank low in the seat, muttering to himself.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing," Dell barked. "Nothing."

"I thought I heard you say you wanted your mother," London smiled.

"I didn't say anything," Dell snarled.

"Look, Dell," London sighed. "I can let you off here at Barahamsville, if you want. You don't have to do this. No reason for you to get involved. I'll stop at this rest area and you can call someone to get you. You'll never see me again. You aren't in any danger..."

"No... I am involved. I chose to help you because I hit you with my car. I... I feel bad because I was a coward back there."

"No reason to feel like a coward."

"Well... I could have done something."

"Nothing you can do if you aren't carrying a gun."

Dell shrugged. He reached in the front pocket of his skinny jeans and took out a bottle. Looked like a prescription. His nervous hands had trouble getting the top off, but he managed to pop it off. Instead of taking one or two pills, Dell held the opening of the bottle to his thin lips and shook out three or four little yellow pills.

Yellow pills London saw scattered on the countertop at The Good Place café.

Something clicked in London's mind. The coincidence was too weird. The yellow pills, Dell driving like a maniac away from the café. But who used the shotgun on cook and waitress? London reached for the .45 in his belt. But Dell drew his .44 first.

"Drive, mother fucker," Dell shoved the barrel of the gun into London's neck. The change was radical and quick. A crazy look snuck into Dell's eyes and a sick, masochist sneer followed a deeper voice. Dell's phone rang. "Hand it over!" he demanded.

London handed the phone to Dell. Dell swiped with a finger, activating speaker phone. He screamed at the phone.

"Hello!"

"Baby?" Loretta's voice could be heard. "Baby? Is that you, baby? Marvin, baby?"

"It's me, mama. Where are you?" Dell said.

"I'm at home. Where are you?"

"Apparently, we're coming to you."

"We? Who is we, baby?"

"Oh, just a friend," Dell laughed. "He was already on his way to see you."

"Um, who is this 'He'?"

"It'll be a surprise," Dell chuckled. "So crazy. Did you rob somebody, mama?"

Loretta giggled. "We did. Henry and me did." The expression on Dell's face said it all. He definitely disapproved that Henry was still in the picture. Loretta continued. "We did it by accident. Henry loved this car we saw at the gas station. So we rode a ways and pretended to break down. Ugg, that man was so rude! We had to shoot him. Anyways, can you believe this? We found some money in the trunk..."

"Mama, you bad girl," Dell said.

"Mmmm... come home and I'll show you how bad I am."

"Won't be long. Another fifteen minutes."

"Ooooo... I'll go get ready for you, baby. I'll send Henry to the movies," Loretta said. "Baby... let's never fight like we did at the Café?"

"We won't ma'am. I swear, it's all roses from now on. He won't get in the way ever again. Guess what?"

"What, baby?"

"Dell is gone."

"What? Shut up! You mean... forever?"

"Oh yeah. The pills worked," Dell said.

Loretta squealed "Oh my God! Hurry, hurry, hurry! I love that big, bad Marvin!"

"I know you do, mama."

Loretta let out a deep sigh. "I'll be in the tub waiting for you."

8

London could have crashed the SUV, took the gun from Dell and killed him. He thought about it every time he turned a corner. A light pole, ram another car. But he thought it would be better to drive to the address, kill the boy, his mother, and especially Dell. Then take the money to Ramirez. Go home and sleep for two days. The situation became even stranger.

When they drove up to the house, Henry came out flaunting a shotgun. He stood on the porch, confident he had everything under control. London wondered if that was the same shotgun used on those people in the café. More than likely, London thought. More than likely.

London and Dell got out of the SUV. Dell marched London up the short driveway, the .44 poking him in the back.

"What are you doing here?" Dell said.

"Well, coconut, I live here... and this was my daddy's house." Henry said.

"It's my house now, Punk."

"I bet you said that to all the boys in jail." Henry giggled, readjusted his glasses on his face.

"Enough talking zit-tits. Take him in the house," Dell shoved London and he tripped forward to Henry. "I'm going inside to fuck your mama."

Henry shrugged. "You and everyone else in this dumb city."

Henry and London followed Dell inside a messy house that was not only in dire need of cleaning, but fixing a huge hole in the ceiling that showed a bedroom above, and holes in the walls that exposed pipes and wiring. The

bathroom door was closed. They could hear Dell and Loretta splashing in the tub, huffing and puffing in rhythm.

Henry pointed the shotgun to the molded stairs. "Up," he said.

"Look kid," London started to say and Henry objected whole-heartedly. He jabbed the stock of the shotgun in London's face. London immediately felt surging pain in the bridge of his nose. He staggered, keeping his balance. He took a few steps, his arms waving slightly from side to side.

"I'm not a kid!" Henry screamed. His voice broke in the middle of his tirade and when he noticed what he had done to London, he giggled. "You look like a monkey."

When London had control of his body and mind, he said to the boy: "You don't understand what is going to happen."

"I don't care," Henry said. "You're my bitch while my mom and coconut finish making up."

London shook his head. "You people are fucking stupid... listen to me. All I want is my car and the fucking money! If I get the money, I can give it to the right people. No one here will die... maybe."

"Walk up the stairs, Monkey!"

"You're lucky I don't take that shotgun and shove it up your ass!"

"You don't have the balls! I'm in charge!" Henry got London again. The stock caught London in the cheek just as he was about to duck.

London cried out. He bounced off the wall and hung on to the rail of the stairs. Shit, he thought. I'm still off from that bullet grazing me. I'm making stupid mistakes and bad decisions. I should've already killed these fuckers!

Instead of fighting back, London did as Henry demanded. He walked up the stairs slowly, and not exactly

intentionally slow, either. Henry thought so. He jabbed the stock of the shotgun in between London's shoulder blades. London cried out again. He stumbled forward, fell to his knees. Henry laughed.

"That's right," he put the barrel to London's head. "Crawl up the stairs, Monkey."

London did it.

He told himself he was waiting for the right moment when he wasn't second guessing his own decisions. When it felt right. He told himself the next time he wouldn't let the little bastard treat him like this.

"Stand up!" Henry stepped to the side of London and opened the door of his room. "In." He pushed London to the threshold.

Inside Henry's room were all kinds of white supremacy posters and paraphernalia. The obvious one was Hitler's bible to all racists, *Mein Kampf*, on the dresser beside his. The other was a little obscure, even to big time racists. On Henry's bed were pamphlets written by Asa Carter on all subjects such as segregation to why no race should mix to create mud people. Asa Carter was also the western writer Forrest Crater, who wrote The Outlaw Josie Wales. Asa Carter had also been a prominent KKK leader in the fifties and was speechwriter for George Wallace. Only reason London knew who he was because Pop was a huge fan of Outlaw Josie Wales. He wanted to get a copy of the book signed by 'Forrest Carter' at a hotel in New York, but met up with Asa Carter, who sent Pop on his way with several racist insults. Pop researched the man and actually called New York Times and sent all the info on 'Forrest Carter'.

Pop still loves the book and especially the movie Outlaw Josie Wales.

London chuckled. "You don't like black people

very much do you?"

"They're ruining our great country!" Henry said. "Fuck that Lincoln prick for bringing them over here just so he could get even with other white men for making his family poor!"

"What the fuck..." London laughed. "That's... what you believe? Who the fuck taught you...?" London saw the photo in the gold frame of a man in a Klan outfit who looked just like Henry. That answered his question.

"All the mud races were created by the devil anyway!" Henry said. He said it with such conviction that a person with a lower IQ or nonexistent brain cells would actually believe it.

London saw the other photo in a gold frame. He recognized the blonde haired woman with overwhelmingly huge breasts. She was at least forty years of age and not bad looking. London remembered seeing her on TV a few years ago. On a talk show and later on CNN. She fell in love with a student who had been fourteen years old. She couldn't stay away from him, even abducting him at one point. She served six months. He left his family at the age of eighteen to be with her. Last year he robbed a Stuckey's, got two years for that.

Oh boy, London thought. How screwed up was this situation. He decided to pour whiskey on the open wound.

"Yeah. Funny though," London said. "The way you feel... about races... and all..." London laughed threw his hands up in the air. Your mama fucking a black man? Weird isn't it? She must have fantasized about hundreds of black dicks going in that worn out pussy and I bet," London wagged a finger. "She likes to take black dick up the ass. You watch them, don't you?"

"No!" Henry was disgusted by that question. "What kind of sick fucker..."

"Say that about a man's mother?"London shrugged and laughed. "A lot of people would, Henry. What kind of people would steal a man's car? Huh? A car that belonged to his father. A car belonging to a man's father who worked hard to buy that car... take care of that car."

"Fuck your car!" Henry was getting very agitated. Tears ran down his red cheeks.

"What kind of people would steal a man's last pack of cigarettes?"

"Fuck your cigarettes!" Henry's scream became a wail. A voice called from the bathroom.

"Henry?" Loretta called out, her voice muffled. "Are you alright, baby?"

"So... Dell. Or Marvin... whatever he's calling himself..."

"Marvin is his Daddy! He's fucking crazy! He wants to be his Daddy! His Daddy killed people and is now in jail for all that! He's crazy!"

Bare feet on the wood floor outside the door. Loretta's voice wasn't muffled anymore. "Baby? Henry, Baby? What's going on?"

"Not only that... shit... he's not much older than you are," London shrugged, shook his head. "What would Adolf think of that? Your mama fucking a nigger."

Henry was in hysterics. His chest was heaving. His face was screwed up from sobbing, trying to control his tears of rage. He lifted the shotgun up and aimed it at London's face. "You son of a bitch..." he barely managed.

"Yeah," London walked past Henry, placed his hand on the doorknob. "I know."

"Don't!" Henry said. "Stay where you are! I swear I'll shoot you, mother fucker!"

London opened the door. Loretta stood in the hallway, completely naked, water dripping from a very red

body. Henry pulled the trigger.

"Henry? Baby? Are you alright...?"

London leaped forward. His whole body fell to the creaky floorboards. The discharge roared by London's head, caught Loretta between breasts, blowing a hole in her chest cavity the size of a softball. The blast propelled her backwards and she landed hard on the floor. She coughed and blood ran from her mouth to her chin. Loretta's body shook for less than thirty seconds and her eyes rolled into the back of her head.

Henry screamed and his finger slipped, pressed the trigger again. The shotgun went off, but the bullet went backwards, the barrel exploded in his hands, breaking apart from the rest of the shotgun. Henry fell backwards, the bullet lodged in his forehead, the tail end sticking out.

Loretta was dead. Henry was now dead. London stood. Looked at both of them.

"Holy shit," he said to himself. "I didn't expect any of that to happen..."

"You... you killed... my... my mama..." Dell staggered out of the bathroom, pointing that .44 at him. He too was naked, leaving puddles of water wherever he stepped in the hallway. He forced himself to walk closer to London.

Four bullets ripped through Dell in quick succession, all of them fired from an Uzi. Dell swung sideways, hit the wall, slid down slowly. Four holes hit the mark of each rib on his right side. Dell wheezed, muttered something incomprehensible.

The Potters marched upstairs, looking every bit of the part of the fat, unhappy tourist, except with guns. The father did a double take. The mother gasped and the boy hid behind his mother's skirt.

"Holy shitballs," the father laughed. "You? You're

London?"

The mother let out a sigh of relief and her little boy stepped out from behind her, still skittish.

"Yeah... I'm London. Look... uh... I'm not sure where the money is..."

"Oh, we found it," the father guffawed. "Still in a duffle bag in your car. Is that a '73 Cougar?"

"Yeah... well... belonged to my father," London said.

"Sure has been kept well..."

"Dan," the mother interrupted. "We have a short window to get this package to Ramirez."

The father shrugged. "The little woman is right."

"I thought you were going to kill me at the farmhouse," London told him.

"We didn't know who you were. Good thing we didn't take away the boy's fun this weekend," the father laughed. "Caught him looking at the Playboy channel." The father put his hand on his hips and cut his eyes at the boy. The boy was ashamed. "And initially we opted for him to stay at home. Good thing Ramirez overrode that choice. What are you gonna do?"

"Yeah," London nodded. "What are you gonna do?"

"He's definitely going to see Pastor Ripley when we get home." The mother said.

"You people go to church?" London asked.

"Of course!" The father said. "Hey, things aren't what they appear to be."

London scoffed. "Ain't that the fuckin' truth."

Shafer Work

1

For some reason Peter Choaladi decided the Englishman would be a great partner for Barry London on this particular job. Obviously it was a secret joke between Pop and Choaladi. When he was telling London about the job, Choaladi and Pop would snicker. Could it be because my last name and the guy is British? Yeah, London thought. That's exactly what it was.

Yeah. What a great sense of humour.

Peter Choaladi was a Cuban crime boss London and Pop worked for. Choaladi was semi-retired from the life. He didn't get into the business unless it was through London, whom he lent out to others in the life that needed a fixer. Pop was a retired bus driver from Manhattan who runs Choaladi's gambling activities using a used bookstore and newspaper stand as a cover. London started calling Leon Brown 'Pop' because he would always give London fatherly advice. He would also use Pop's vast knowledge of people for leg work. Anything London wanted to know, Pop could make calls and feed London the info.

London took on the job. He wouldn't dare turn one down. Not because he was scared of Choaladi. No, it was out of respect. Choaladi has never lied to London. All the other authority figures have. Lots of people have crossed London.

Some have lived. Some have not.

"Okay, okay," London said. "I get the joke. What's the job, Mr. Choaladi?"

"You go to Prince Street. See Emily Brunswick to pick up your tickets," Choaladi said.

Emily Brunswick... I'd like to pick up Emily and put

her in my bed, London thought.

"Tickets for where?" London asked.

Pop and Choaladi burst into laughter. London was not amused.

"I'm sorry, son," Pop said. "We can't help it. London going to London."

"Fucking old men and their fucking old men sense of humour," London growled and stormed out the door.

2

London went to Prince Street and saw Emily Brunswick. He also saw her husband Terry. Terry worked for a land development company. London didn't like Terry very much. Mostly because he was married to Emily, who was London's idea of the perfect woman. Not just a beautiful redhead built like the pinup girls of the 40s and 50s, she was smart and so damn pleasant. Emily reminded London of a fifth grade school teacher he had a crush on.

Terry, on the other hand, was a little shit with a pencil thin moustache who wore sandals with his suits. He had a whiny voice and he was also an asshole to people. Mainly Emily. London couldn't wrap his head around the fact Emily picked that man over so many other men; the fact that she was so different him, nice and caring and such a beautiful attitude... anyways that's what was on London's mind. Terry also had an annoying way of finishing every sentence with a shrug of his shoulders or tilting his head and waving his hand.

"I'm the one that asked for you," that little shit tilted his head and waved his hand.

"Am I supposed to kiss you on the lips for doing that?" London asked him and sat on the white leather chair across from the black leather couch Terry and Emily sat on.

Terry scrunched up his nose and puckered his lips in offense. "I hardly think this is the right situation to be a smart ass."

"When is the right situation?" London asked. Maybe when I put a bullet in your sorry egg-shaped head, he wanted to say. Of course, that would have upset Emily and possibly turned her against London. And London

damn-for sure did not want the perfect woman to hate him.

Terry sighed. "I cannot make hide or tails sense of this conversation." He was trying his own style of smart quips. It wasn't working out for him. So London thought it better to put a stop to it right away before he lost his cool and strangled the twerp.

"Then I suggest you shut the fuck up and let Emily tell me what the job entails."

There was a tug of a smile on her lips. She ran her tongue across them and the brief smile vanished. It didn't matter how brief. What was important was London saw the smile.

"We have a client who needs a pornographic film retrieved," Emily said. "When we spoke to Mr. Choaladi about this matter, he also had a friend who had interest in this pornographer."

"Did the film reach the internet yet?" London asked.

"No," Terry cut in.

London gave him the eye and he scoffed, looked away.

Again, Emily let a smile slip through. She continued. "The film has not reached the internet. Apparently, there is a fee this pornographer is asking our client to pay."

"To keep it off his websites," London said. "How do I recognize this movie?"

"Apparently it is still a film in a canister. Shot in the nineteen seventies. No transfer to video. So, I'm curious as to how this man is going to get it on the internet."

"He has his own facilities. They work out of a warehouse, I bet. Has a crew to use codecs whatever the fuck else they do. The person who does not want this film uploaded has moved on to bigger and brighter things.

Possibly, a powerful person...”

“Of course!” Terry exclaimed. “Can we just give this man his plane fare...?”

“Hey fella, why don’t you get me a cup of coffee,” London said.

“I am not your go-to boy!” Terry stood. He was fuming, but to anyone else it looked like a child’s tantrum. “I am a man. So you address me as a man!”

“Terry,” London began, cleared his throat. “You realize I am dangerous. I have killed people and not even shed a tear for them?”

“So,” Terry sputtered.

“It is out of respect for Emily, the only reason I have not laid your sorry ass in a shallow grave. One more outburst from you and I may forget that respect,” London moved his eyes back to Emily. “Of course, I can only forget my respect for you, ma’am, for a fledgling moment.”

Oh boy, London thought. I think I just tried to sound poetic.

Terry turned on his heels and marched to the door of their office and said:“I am going out! Fill me in later, Emily!”

The door slammed shut, but only in Terry’s eyes was it out of anger. To London and Emily it was just a closing of the door.

“Forgive Terry,” she said. “He has a short fuse.”

“Mine is a lot shorter,” London told her. He cleared his throat again, felt the need to readdress that remark, but Emily took over. London noticed she was a lot more relaxed.

“Terry also likes to control everything.” Emily said.

“Terry is an asshole,” London found himself saying instead of thinking it. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said...”

“No,” Emily sighed. “He is. He has a lot of faults.

He also has a lot of good points about him. He takes care of me and the business."

London thought about that. He nodded. "Taking care of you is the best point you could make in his case. That's why I haven't hurt him yet."

"Thank you for thinking of me." She smiled at London and his heart melted.

"Continue with your debriefing," London said shakily.

He couldn't help but admire her chestnut hair, which was in a ponytail today. Other times London had seen Emily with her shoulder-length hair down and in dresses or skirts. She wore a pants suit and she couldn't have looked more beautiful. She also looked a woman who was in charge; even though that may not be the truth, London still liked the image. With her hair in a ponytail it highlighted her somewhat delicate round face and definitely those large blue eyes that caused London to notice her in the first place.

"Didn't Mr. Choaladi tell you about the job?"Emily crossed her legs and rested her chin on her fist. London watched the movement and knew he'd a lost a breath.

"He did. I'm pretty sure you could give instructions much better." London didn't mean to say that. Again, he was thinking out loud and flirted when he thought he couldn't flirt. He once had a girlfriend back in Jersey who said he was a consummate flirt. When he served four years in a state prison, London was so conscious of not flirting that it made him stick out like mime on steroids. When he got out of prison, it took him a good two years and Hillary Hathaway, the barmaid at Sturgis Grill, to bring that flirt back from the dead.

Emily was amused by that remark. She may have even been a little turned on. She leaned forward and

brushed a few strands of her bangs from her eyes. "Well, Barry, we need you to go to London..." she stopped talking. A smirk crossed her face. She fought the urge to make the joke. London saw that in her eyes. "Anyways, not only to retrieve that film, but to shadow someone my client believes is an Interpol snitch."

"By the way," London said. "Would you tell me who in hell this client is? For some reason Mr. Choaladi wouldn't say..."

"Hildy Barnes."

The very same Hildy Barnes, known to the street as the Godmother Heroin dealer. London did not like Hildy Barnes, nor any of the shit mongers she kept company with.

"He knew I wouldn't take the job if he told me," London said. He stood and with quickened pace, headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Emily was surprised by London's reaction.

"I'm going to tell that old son of a bitch off!"

"Why would you not do the job?"

"Hildy Barnes, if you must know, murdered one of my best friends or had him murdered, anyways, she ordered the killing and he was cut to pieces with a fucking chainsaw!" London was so flustered he was stepping all over his own words and actually, no periods were at the end of his sentences. "We were only kids - hell, I was twenty and he was nineteen, just starting out with Choaladi..." London suddenly stopped talking. He thought carefully what he was going to say next. "I don't want to disrespect Mr. Choaladi. I don't want to disappoint you. I don't think I can do this job."

"He didn't know," Emily blurted out.

London turned around. He faced Emily, who

looked stressed. She had a hand on her forehead, her eyes steady on the floor. London shut the door. He ambled to her, waited for to say something. Emily lifted her sad eyes to London's.

"You better explain," he said.

"Mr. Choaladi doesn't know Hildy Barnes wants help to get rid of this government snitch," Emily said.

"You didn't say get rid of before," London said.

"I thought maybe... well... if you found out..."

"I would kill him anyway because he's a rat," London sat down. "It doesn't always work that way, Emily. I have to have the go ahead from an employer... even then... how does Hildy Barnes know this Colin Shafer is a snitch for Interpol?"

"I don't know. Look..." Emily drew in a heavy sigh. The stress took a big toll on her facial expressions. While still attractive, the depressed demeanour suddenly made her a victim in London's eyes. "I... we need this money... this job. Terry and I sunk every penny in that housing development Garry Hogan had a hand in. Remember?"

"Yeah," London nodded. "He was caught embezzling funds from his company about six months ago."

"That included all the money raised and donated for that project," Emily said. "We're going to lose our home. Our business. All of our friends will turn their backs on us. We could end up dead when the other business partners tire of our begging for extensions."

London scoffed, looked away. "Shit," he closed his eyes and thought again about what he wanted to say. He wanted to say no. He couldn't help. He wanted to say, if you leave Terry, become my girl, I'll make sure you're safe, Terry's on his own. He wanted to say, "I love you."

London didn't say any of those things.

"Okay," He told Emily. "I'll do it."

3

He was very thin, Colin Shafer. Very pale, almost milky-white that lent to a ghostly presence. So thin, in fact, everyone thought the man was ill. Thus the words, 'doctor' or 'Health clinic' were stepping stones to the man's rising anger. Which immediately everyone who uttered those words saw the smouldering fire in his eyes. He wore thick framed glasses that set on a regal nose. To be in the profession that Colin was in, at first glance, those in contact with him almost never took him seriously. Well the glasses didn't help, but it was his rather light and feminine demeanour that caught them off guard. And a lisp Colin refused to hide.

He was in London to see Harry Cutter. Cutter sent word that he needed Shafer to collect some money from a local pornographer who hadn't shared the profits. Harry was sitting in a corner table at the pub Ghastly, a bit of business he'd just taken away from the Lydon family. He had one of the girls on his lap that frequently starred in the films he backed. She was a tall, leggy brunette that was encouraging Harry to run his nasty green fingernails across her tights. How she stayed on Harry's lap was a miracle. The sixty-two year old geezer had no frame about his frail body.

In the background was one of Harry's regular muscle-bound goons. He wasn't anyone Shafer knew. The man in a turtleneck kept smirking at him, at the same had his arms folded fronting the tough guy scene. Harry introduced them in a cautious way. Often men in his position do that to make sure no bad blood turns into a shootout.

"Colin," They touched palms, not much of a handshake at all. "Good of you to come to London from the Black Country. Still following the Reds in Football?" Harry's voice was a booming if not ear piercing squawk.

"Cheers, Harry. Of course I still follow Liverpool. There is no other club in existence is there?" Shafer smiled slightly.

The goon snickered, shook his head.

London couldn't understand a damn thing they were saying.

"Colin, this is a cousin from the pond," Harry said.

London did understand that. He stepped forward and offered his hand. Shafer looked at it as if London was handing him a pile of shit. London put his hand in his pocket and gave Shafer the cold stare back.

"What's he here for?" Shafer's nostril flared.

"Be nice," Harry ordered. A crooked finger pointed at Shafer. The nail at the end was green. The sight of it made London's stomach turn. "If you try to start something, Colin, I'll cut yer bleedin' liver out and feed it to my dogs. You understand?"

Shafer eyed London. A huge grin made his lips curl up and his furry eyebrows lower into a V.

"Naw," Shafer giggled. "Just jokin' on you, Stuckey."

"Stuckey? Where the fuck did that come from?" London raised both open hands to God to express dissatisfaction with the moniker. The room erupted in laughter. London was even more in the dark.

"Oh, that is sweet," Harry wiped tears from his eyes. "Barry London is this fella's name."

"Caw. You poor soul," Shafer smirked. "Your family really thought it right to call themselves after the worst fucking city in Europe? Tsk, tsk."

"Anyways, Colin, he's here to assist you with a little

matter at hand."

"Harry," Shafer went cold again. "I don't need another asshole in the equation. Especially a red, white and blue greaseball."

"We're going to get something straight you fuckin' potato eater," London took a step to meet up with Shafer again. "I ain't no greaser from the Bronx. I'm from Jersey. And where I come from we eat pansies like you and we don't hang on to the dream that we wouldn't have been speaking German if red, white and blue hadn't our pale white asses!"

"Okay, okay. Enough of the tough talk and insults on each other's heritage," Harry bellowed. "In spite of Mr. London's silly name and that he has his facts wrong about historical events, he is very competent. Colin here, is the same. You both are needed and I'm pretty fucking sure either of your bosses would be more than disappointed in both of you if this was fouled up."

Colin gave him a cold stare as he sat in a chair across from Harry. The girl whispered in Harry's ear, glanced at Shafer.

"He might be interested," Harry whispered back. "I'll ask him later, little girl." He smacked her ass, and the girl rose up, smoothed her short green dress and sat at another table. "Colin, do you know Gerry? He's my new assistant."

"I haven't had the pleasure," Colin adjusted his glasses on his face.

"And you never will," Gerry the goon snickered.

"Gerry," Harry warned. "Colin is a trusted associate. He should be treated with respect."

Gerry made a slight noise, rolled his eyes. Shafer ignored the sleight for the moment. He needed to get on with the business at hand.

"Okay, Harry," Shafer crossed his legs in the same form Harry's girl had hers. "Get on with it. My Violet is in a play at school and I don't want to miss it."

"Little girl, get Colin a pint, will you?"Harry said. He smiled at London. "Beer for you, alright?"

London shook his head no.

The girl jumped from her chair, swiftly sashayed to the bar. Colin noticed she wasn't wearing any shoes. She wasn't barefoot, either. She wore an off-colour tan and black tights. Then he remembered that almost none of Harry's girls ever wore shoes. They always wore tights of some sort. Colin had a twinge of a smile at that fact.

Harry motioned for London to come closer. Gerry followed, even though he wasn't called over. "Here it is Colin," Harry leaned in as much as his hump back would let him. "I need you and Mr. London to do Tomlinson one."

Colin nodded. "Still missing payments I see."

"Worse now," Harry scowled. "Mr. London's employers need some film back. Tomlinson been putting the squeeze on for that film," Harry paused, then snarled. Those tiny black eyes danced around in his ancient head. "That fucking twat has blabbed he's too big for my help. Went to the Parker brothers for protection."

"Can't stand a backstabbing ponce." Colin said.

Gerry broke into laughter. "Bollocks!" he cried out.

"The fuck did you say, Gerry? Do you fancy your job?" Harry used his big boy voice when he needed to mind the boys.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Cutter. I just can't help meself. This," Gerry pointed at Colin, laughed again. "This is a joke, eh? How's this fairy and Yank going to handle a job like Tomlinson? If he'd done it right the first time, you'd have no problems with the beaver peeper."

"Gerry, you are way out of line..." Harry stopped

talking. He watched Colin rise slowly, unbutton his blazer. He knew it was too late. At that moment the girl walked across the room with a pint glass on a tray.

"What are you going to do, you dick sucking queer," Gerry unfolded his arms and motioned to swing first, but Colin already had swiped the glass from the tray, dowsing the girl in bitter. She screamed, danced a few steps back, looking down at her stained white blouse.

Some of the beer caught London on his shirt. London was not amused. He stepped toward Shafer, but soon realized Shafer was in a psychotic train of thought. His eyes huge, transfixed on Gerry, and the veins connected to the dilated pupils had become fire red. London stepped out of Shafer's way just in time.

Shafer smashed the glass across the right side of Gerry's head. Gerry swung in spite of the pain and one large shard of glass embedded in his skull. The girl screamed again, ran into the game room.

Shafer ducked, parried, and gave Gerry a swift kick in the balls. Then, two hard punches in the midsection. Gerry welled up. Blood ran down his face and intertwined with tears. Gerry coughed, eyes bulging out. He tried to find his composure, staggered instead. Shafer reached up to the man towering over him and dashed his fist quickly into Gerry's Addams apple. Gerry gurgled, fell hard to the floor. He made no attempt to get up.

Shafer buttoned his blazer back, turned to Harry. "Sorry about the mess, Harry."

Harry sighed. He never once moved from his chair. He knew neither man would dare touch him, either accidently or accidently on purpose.

London was impressed. He glared at Shafer, grinning. He choked back laughter.

"Don't sweat it, Colin. I've got people to clean this

up," Harry said. By 'people' he meant Gerry.

"I think I'll pay our Mr. Tomlinson a visit. Have a drink with him," Shafer said. "Come on then, Stuckey."He quick-stepped to the door, and said in probably the worst American accent ever uttered:"We got a job to do."

4

It was a rather nice house where Dickey Tomlinson did his films and magazines. As a pornographer, one would be led to believe he lived in an attic above his mother's bedroom. It was a four-bedroom house that once was a semi-detached. It was in a cul-de-sac, but the houses on either side were empty. Most likely squatters lived in the other houses.

Shafer scoped the place. He noticed Tomlinson didn't have his usual guards around. That was the reason Harry had London go with Shafer. London was impressed Shafer knew how to get in and out of places with no fuss. Most guys he teamed up with were morons and usually set off the alarms. They discussed several ways of getting in and all of them sounded reasonable.

Something was definitely off about this situation.

Shafer noticed the back door was left slightly ajar, which was odd. He kept one hand on his .38 as he pushed the door open gingerly with his shoe. He walked in slowly, angled to the right and stood against the wall. London followed, his Glock in his hand. He angled to the left and braced the wall.

They saw a tall, gangly man in his early fifties in a blond wig that resembled a Beatle wig, only longer. He was in a track suit with the pants around his ankles. There was girl, very young, sitting beside him, with her hands in his crotch. To the right, sitting on a bean bag was Tomlinson. He was laughing, speaking in his thick Welch accent, almost garbled. To the left was a police officer sitting on an ottoman, laughing in a high pitched voice, as if it were sped up on a tape. He had his trousers down around his ankles

as well. His cap covered his crotch and he kept saying he wanted to play peek-a-boo with the young girl.

Shafer didn't know how old she was, he guessed seventeen, but he wasn't sure. He did know that he was sickened by what he witnessed, and by the moment, he could feel his blood boil. His anger reached its peak when he recognized the man on the couch getting a hand job from the young girl.

The man had been on British television for nearly forty years. Usually hosting a top rated music show that counted down the country's biggest hits, having the singers and bands perform those hits seemingly live (which they didn't play live) in front of an audience of screaming teenagers and young adults. The man also hosted a very popular Saturday morning children's show where he would enter a child's home and promise to give the child anything they desired.

To London, it was all so surreal. He was flabbergasted at what he was seeing. He moved his eyes Shafer's way as if to ask for instructions. Shafer had already made his decision. Shafer dashed from around the corner, his .38 aimed in the direction of all three men.

"You dirty fuckers!"he said through clenched teeth.

Tomlinson gasped, slid to the floor and hid behind the bean bag. The cop dropped his cap, exposing his very small genitals. He clamoured for the radio attached to his vest, but he was only able to pick up static. London appeared on the right side of Shafer. He fired once.

The top of the police officer's head exploded. A massive goo of brain particles. Blood danced in the air around him and landed on the framed painting of Queen Elizabeth II. The girl screamed, her eyes were wild and hands flew up to cover them. She kicked her legs and screamed again in a panic. Suddenly, she hopped to her feet

and grabbed her coat. She ran past Shafer and went out the backdoor.

A short, fat man in a silk robe came charging out of the bathroom brandishing a shotgun. He fired at Shafer and London. The blast missed them by a mile, and took a chunk of the crown moulding above their heads. Shafer recoiled slightly, caught his balance and fired twice. Both bullets ripped through the man's neck. He fell to the floor, flopped a few times like a fish out of water. He groaned loudly until it became his last attempt at catching his breath.

The tall man was in shock, breathing irregularly. "L-look... we can work this out can't we... I'll pay you twenty-five thousand..."

"You dirty fucker," Shafer replied. "Shouldn't you be on POP IDOL or that fucking annoying kids' show my daughter watches, JIMMY'LL GET YA ANYTHING?"

"Please. I-I have so much to offer..." The tall man turned on the water works, fake sobbing. Shafer could always tell when a man was legitimately afraid for his life or just a liar. The tall man was a liar.

"I'll bet you say that to all little girls, don't you? You dirty fucking git."

Suddenly a lamp flew past London. He dodged it just in time. It came from Tomlinson's direction, who was bent over from a piss-poor throw. London fired, a bullet caught Tomlinson in the thigh. Tomlinson howled in pain, beat his fist on the wood floor.

Shafer turned and found the tall man going out the window, his round belly getting caught, his legs bucking, knocking over a book case. Shafer fired. The bullet caught the tall man in the left cheek of his ass. He howled like a wounded animal, slithered through the window.

Shafer cursed under his breath. He ran to window, aimed, and decided not to cause more of a ruckus than he

already had. The tall man was running, stopped and limped, then started running down the street. He jumped inside an open door of a van. The van coughed, sped away.

"Caw," Shafer said. "He's fast for an old geezer."

Shafer heard the kettle whistle. He looked toward the kitchen, then at Tomlinson. Tomlinson was laying on the floor, trying to crawl to a desk, where he probably had a weapon of some kind. At the rate Tomlinson was going, Shafer had time to get the kettle.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" He asked London.

London snickered. "I'd love a cup."

"Right away, Governor." Shafer went into the kitchen.

London walked over to where Tomlinson was. He placed his shoe on Tomlinson's wounded thigh, applied just enough pressure. Tomlinson screamed.

"What do you want?" he moaned. His accent was not so hard to understand after all.

"You have a film we want," London said.

"Which one... you shit heel. I have over five thousand..."

"One you haven't converted to digital yet."

"How... how did you know about that one? I haven't even had a chance to look at it. That was all you wanted? I would've sold it to you."

"I'm sure you would have," London said. "But my employer doesn't like being squeezed for money."

"For that film?" Tomlinson looked at London incredulously.

"Are you using others for blackmail?"

"That's a dumb fucking question. Yes! Jesus, take your foot from my leg!"

"Where's the film?"

"On my desk," Tomlinson pointed. London

searched his desk. He found the dusty grey-silver can shaped like a wheel. Tomlinson kept talking while London looked through piles of photos of celebrities engaged in all kinds of activities they wouldn't want their mothers to know about.

"I haven't even had a chance to give it to my staff so I can look at it. Look," Tomlinson continued. He limped to a chair and sat. "I'm not asking for any money for this film. More than likely I wouldn't even upload it to the internet. I'm a collector of vintage porn. If anything comes in with a can, I have my staff prepare it for my own viewing experience, then I store it away in my vault."

Shafer appeared with an electric kettle.

"I bet you would like a cup," Shafer said to Tomlinson.

"No, no, no... please..." Tomlinson begged. He began to tear up.

"Hey," London chuckled. "Come on. You don't do that."

"Am I fucking talking to you?!" Shafer screamed.

"I'm trying to tell you there's no reason to torture anymore..."

Shafer cut off London. "Don't stick your finger in my shit!"

"We got the film," London told him.

"I don't have the money he owes, now do I!"

"It's in the safe!" Tomlinson offered up quickly. He pointed to a vintage nude framed picture of Bridgette Bardot. "Behind the picture. A wall safe. The numbers are 32 left, 23 right, 35 left," Tomlinson shrugged. "Bridgette Bardot's measurements," he tried to smile.

Shafer set the electric kettle on a side table and went to the picture. He blew Bridgette Bardot a kiss before he opened the picture like a cabinet door. He turned the

tumbler on the safe to the numbers exactly as he was told. The safe door popped open. There inside the grey metal cabinet, were twenty stacks of bills with the picture of the Queen on them.

One gunshot was heard. One bullet pierced Tomlinson's skull.

He fell back in his chair, hunched to the left and slumped down. Blood splatted the wall behind him. The gunshot came from an open window and from a rifle. London and Shafer fell to the floor. Two more shots were fired; both bullets Struck Bridgette Bardot in the face, leaving two very large holes.

London rolled across the floor and over to the open window. He stuck the barrel of his Glock out the window and fired twice. He heard someone scream. A rifle slid off the roof of the semi-detached, fell to the paved street below. London saw a middle-aged man with gnarly hair trying to keep from falling off the roof.

The man was holding on to a gutter with one hand, kicking at the shingles. He also hand the other hand holding his left side, trying to keep the bleeding to a minimum. He was failing at both tasks. Just as London was ready to climb out the window, the man fell. A stressed scream was pinched off when impact intruded.

Shafer was the first out the backdoor, then London. The rifle lay about ten feet from the man. It was an old hunting rifle, a bolt action Holland with a sight barely mounted on. London wondered why anyone dumb enough to shoot at people would use such a weapon. That question was posed to the man, who lay on his back, injuries visible by the gash on top of his head and the way his limbs were crumpled like a bawled up piece of paper.

"What's this, then?" Shafer knelt on one knee. There was a little bit of humanity in his voice.

"Colin..." The man croaked. "Haven't seen you in a dog's age. Where've you been keeping?"

"Infiltrating the royals. I've been cleaning Harry's shoes for the last three years."

The man squeezed out a laugh. We heard sirens in the distance. London saw an ambulance out on the main road turning into the gated community. Three police cars were following. Strange how the cops didn't come quicker. But then again, that tall man Shafer shot in the ass, more than likely owned the local boys. Not too different from the States.

"Better hurry," London said. "Cops right around the corner."

"Why take a shot at us?"

"I wouldn't have, if I knew it was you Colin. I owe Harry. In bed for three and can't even pay the rent. Ahhh... damn the horses."

Shafer was enraged, at least for a moment. London saw it on his face. Shafer gritted his teeth. "Well, old boy, you'll be with Gwen now. Once Harry's gang find out you didn't do me in, they'll be at your hospital bed, administrating their own medicine."

"Only fitting," the man chuckled. "I've been a bastard all my life."

5

They went back to Harry's.

Shafer knew something was wrong. No one was guarding the building's entrance. They went down the hallway. They saw blood smeared on the walls. They moved down the hallway a little way and there were five bodies lying on top of each other in a corner. The guards.

Shafer and London moved on to Harry's suite. Harry was lying face down. Shafer turned him over. Harry had been shot in the neck and chest. Shafer was broken up. He sobbed hard. He leaned in and whispered something in Harry's ear.

London heard someone in the closet. He opened the door quickly and brandished his Glock. Harry's girl was in there, hiding behind the coats. She was terrified. London offered her a hand. She reluctantly accepted.

She hugged London, and immediately wept. London was caught off guard, but realized the right thing to do was to hug her back and console her. London looked over at Shafer. He was sitting in a chair, taking Harry's death pretty hard. London guessed Shafer was thinking of all the time Old Harry helped Shafer out.

"Who did this?" London asked her, once she got herself together.

As soon as the question was posed, the girl's head exploded. Blood covered London and the realization that he was holding a dead person came to him seconds later. London let her slip from his arms and slide to a crouching position between his legs. In clear view, was Gerry, the barrel of his .45 smoking. Gerry laughed maniacally.

Pure anger intruded London's brain. He charged

Gerry. Gerry was not prepared for a fight. He fired once and the bullet grazed London's cheek. Adrenaline and anger fuelled his charge, London didn't even feel the pain. He took hold of Gerry's arm pulled it the opposite direction. There was a snap and Gerry cried out, dropped the .45.

London kicked Gerry in the midsection. Gerry doubled over and whinged. London picked up the .45 and slapped Gerry across the cheek. He fell backwards. London pushed the barrel in Gerry's face. He was ready to pull the trigger when he heard Shafer speak.

"Don't do it," Shafer put a hand on London's wrist, pushed away his aim slightly. "We can use Gerry."

"Use him? Don't you want to kill him for what he did?"

"I put the idea in his head. I told him he should clean house, take over. Harry was getting on. He could run things better," Shafer said.

"You had him kill... Harry and that innocent girl?" London was taking it all in. "Harry was your mentor!"

Shafer bit his lower lip. "Harry was very kind to me growing up, that is true," Shafer nodded. "Harry was also a rat."

London found all of it too much to take. He sat in a chair, hung his head. "It was Harry I was supposed to shadow."

"The old git was working with Interpol. Harry had been caught in that under-age sex ring last year. The girl... well, she was an Interpol agent..." Suddenly there was a pained expression on Shafer's face. "You thought it was me?"

"I was told it was you," London said.

Shafer tossed the .45 at London's feet. "I'm not capable of that kind of betrayal." Shafer walked out, slamming the door.

London heard voices outside Harry's building. He knew it was Interpol. He picked up the .45, went over to Gerry. Gerry immediately began to beg for his life. London handed the gun to him. "You're gonna need this, asshole."

London left by the back way, same as Shafer.

The Smelch Bar

1

Three men chased London down an alley in downtown L.A. All three men were spraying the alley with bullets from submachine guns. Luckily for London, they were terrible shots. Unlucky for London was about six blocks earlier, he'd lost his Glock down a sewer hole. Bullets pierced storefront windows, the windows of Acuras and European sports cars, and walls of an apartment building as they chased London down a hill.

All three gunmen screamed at London in an eastern-bloc accent. All three men wanted what was in the duffle bag London was carrying. London ducked behind a dumpster and the men ran past him. To be on the safe side, London decided to go in the bar where he'd met with Judy Flores. Judy was a friend of Mr. Choaladi's. London was instructed to look for one thing she knew was in L.A.: her Smelch Bear, a stuffed animal her grandfather had given to her father when he was a little boy. Her father, who for some reason had left the family years ago, and when he did, he took the Smelch Bear with him.

London sat down at the bar, placed the duffle bag on the stool next to him. An old drunk and a man in a business suit were sitting next to him. The old drunk was in the middle of a story, when a man wearing a red and white striped shirt and black pants, twice as big as the drunk, ordered him to shut up.

"I want to drink in peace," the man said. "Like everyone else in this joint. We're sick of your stories!"

"I'd like to hear the story," London said.

"Nobody asked you, asshole," the man said.

"You speak for everyone in the bar?"

The man turned to London, cracking his knuckles, trying to look mean.

"No," the man said. He put his fist in London's face. "This does!"

London bit down hard on the man's wrist, drew blood, which ran down to his elbow. The man screamed and staggered backwards a step or so. London reached over the drunk, gripped the bottle of Hennessey by the neck and slammed the fat part of the glass on the man's head. The bottle shattered, and the man fell to the floor. He was out cold.

"You son of a bitch!" The drunk screamed. "I can't afford another bottle!"

"Calm down you old bastard. I just saved your life," London told him.

"My life?! My life? Without the booze, you fucking idiot, I won't survive the night! I jus that bottle..."

"Look," London plopped a hundred dollar bill on the counter. "I'll buy you a couple bottles okay? Now calm down."

The drunk sniffed the air. Shook his arrogant chicken head as he spoke. "You put it that way, there's no problems, huh?"

London told the bartender to fetch one bottle of Hennessey, for now.

"Yeah," London said. "No problems, old man."

"With a bottle, you get a story."

London sighed, rolled his eyes. "Awesome...let's hear it."

2

Caroline lived on the top floor of a three story apartment complex. Her front window overlooked the river Gower, which helped the city-state Kalen to split its border with its sister city-state, Kazan. At the end of World War One Kalen and Kazan became united under the name of Baltica, because it's what the rest of the world called them. Baltica had once been the strong-arm of the continent for shipping and receiving goods. But in the last decade of the twentieth century, a civil war devastated not only the government, but the economy. Feuding factions murdered up to ten thousand of its citizens.

And you wouldn't believe what the dispute was about. Colors. Yes, colors. In different societies, something so normal can mean different things. To the Baltica people, nationalism was pride. Pride was your family crest, which included your family color. The Anjohoves were the royals before WW1 and ruled the Baltica lands for almost fifty years. Many families spawned off of the Anjohoves because King Hva simply loved to sire children. On their family crest was of course, courage, a lion in a snowy land, and the color of red. Red meant their family was tough and loyal.

After King Hva passed, his sons ruled jointly and were involved in a brutal devastation of the land. They ruled with an iron fist. They starved the people and nearly wiped out a small portion of green-eyed folk known as Ghuluers. They lived in the southern part of Baltica and were mostly farmers. They practiced a ritualistic form of Christianity where sacrifices of animals were common. Considered ignorant and useless to the royals, the sons butchered several thousand Ghuluers, for the most part, to

take land from them. King Hva's sons were never popular and were always favorite targets of assassins. The oldest son was murdered, the younger son ran away, dying penniless in a villa in Spain.

The sons no longer in power, the country voted for a Prime Minister. Dhule Grayer was his name. He was wonderful to the country. Lifted most taxes, fixed the train system so transportation was not a headache anymore. Grayer also brought the car industry to Baltica, He even helped develop early radio and built movie houses in remote areas. The economy soared. His family crest consisted of a hand with two fingers crossed, meaning a united people. The background was the color black.

During WW1, Grayer was assassinated. The country was in turmoil until the end of the Great War and Ghola Gahlla was appointed Prime Minister by the European powers. His family had no ties to anyone from the past, and future Prime Ministers were the same. No colors, no family crests... no political struggles. For the rest of the century, they became invisible to the world; often relying on help from the Soviet Union, sometimes Europe came to their rescue, and one time, Baltica received a gift from the U.S. while Carter was in office.

The colors of black and red have always been the subject of terrible arguments in the street and even in households. Literally, riots would erupt just because of those two colors. God forbid you wore a red scarf walking down the street where a neighborhood of Dhule Grayer supporters advertised black banners on their windows.

When it was proposed that a new flag be commissioned, it was also suggested that red be thrown into the color scheme to show the history of the nation. Senators turned on senators, news reporters turned on reporters, even members of the Olympic basketball team

turned on each other. That was the beginning of the horrible, gruesome conflict. Civil war broke out. Neighbors murdered neighbors, wives murdered husbands, lovers murdered lovers, and children murdered children.

Caroline was one of those victims of the civil war.

A homemade bomb mangled her legs when she was seven years old. All through the conflict, Caroline and her family lived underground, because her father refused to give up his loyalty to the color black. When it was decided by the U.N. to split the country into two city-states, the river Gower dividing a warring people, Caroline was seventeen. With the war over, Caroline was allowed in the university to study law. Suddenly, the rights of the afflicted were yanked. No longer seen as real citizens who could help the country, Caroline was institutionalized. Four years later, some of her rights were given back. Still, it was in law that the afflicted could be seen, but not heard. So they were trained not speak at all, using pen and paper to communicate. If that law was broken, their voice heard, they could be eradicated.

Caroline's will to study as a law or interest to venture the outside world, had waned. Her sister wrote a worldwide bestselling book about the civil war and became a spokesperson for her country. But no one knew of the laws suppressing the disabled. Her sister planned to write an article on that subject. Caroline's sister died suddenly in a car wreck. That was strange because Caroline's sister never learned to drive. She was found behind the wheel of the car, wrapped around a tree. No evidence, no witnesses.

A trust fund was set up. Part of those funds supported Caroline. She was moved into the plush one bedroom apartment overlooking the river Gower. Her lawyer and head of the trust fund Masal Klon, visited once a week, bringing supplies. Mr. Klon was an unusual man,

very pale, powder white skin, with very red hair and one eye larger than the other. At first, Caroline was afraid of him. She would not even reply back to Mr. Klon with the pen and paper. After a few months, she became used to him. He would tell her stories of his family, what his children were up to, and even offered to bring her a puppy his dog had given birth to. She eventually would write on paper her questions, write him a list of supplies, needs and wants.

The other side of the river was another three story apartment building. That apartment seemed to stay empty for most of the first year Caroline lived in her cozy one bedroom apartment. Out of the blue, a man appeared at the window. He was short, balding, and had a hump on his back. He wore huge, wire rimmed glasses. He too, like Caroline, seemed to have a disability that restricted his movements, Just like Caroline, he liked to watch the river and watch Caroline watch the river.

Just like Caroline, his government had taken away his right to speak. To be seen and not heard, it is law.

All day, they would watch either each other or the currents of the river bob up and down, carrying different objects from one side of the beach to the other side of the beach. Caroline would watch this man eat his tuna cakes and he would watch her eat Mackerel salad. In the evening, she would drink her tea, and he would skin his carrots, at least two, and use a long jagged blade to slice them into small pieces before chewing each one fiercely like a bunny rabbit.

There are two things that the rest of the world did not know about the Baltics. One: no matter what is going on, war or no war; their mail system is very efficient. Nothing, by no means, nothing has ever shaken up that part of the government. Storms, cataclysms, end of the world... nothing can come between a Baltic and his or her

mail. Nothing. The efficient mail service is all due to an underground mail room several thousand feet under both cities, built in the early 1900s.Each building is marked with a number. Pneumatic tube transport is a cylindrical containers connected between both city-states and air compression shoots. The package, the letter, even pet carriers with pets, are sent to the exact address. No mistakes have ever been recorded. Only a few hundred people operate this mail room, and their identities are kept secret just in case an enemy decides to disrupt the mail. Only problem with that is, Baltica has never been to war with anyone other than themselves. Two: They are so good at espionage and being a police state, even a child would never know his or her mother was a secret policeman. Same principal as the mail service, except to reiterate, they have only been an enemy to themselves. What the rest of the world didn't know either, was Kazan and Kalen governments had been waging a secret war on each other since supposed peace was installed. Each City-state government was abducting each other's citizens and brainwashing or interrogating through torture.

So when a package arrived at Caroline's apartment with a return address from Kalen, she was not surprised.

A red box was presented to Caroline, about the size of a shoe box. Shot right out of the tubes in the walls of the apartment building and out of small dumbwaiter. A bell rang, and a window opened. The package fell to the floor and rolled to her feet. At first, the color red repelled her. She did not want to open it. She would look at it, and become offended, then give the man across river dirty looks. He would smile and wave emphatically. After a few days, she became more curious than offended. The man would wave at her, smile, his face would light up every time Caroline would look at him.

Finally, when night crept in, Caroline opened the package.

She unfastened the ribbon that held the top over the box, reached inside and found a tiny brown bear with wiry hair, small button eyes. He'd sent Caroline a Smelch bear. They were very popular stuffed animal when she was a little girl. The toy was so popular, a cartoon ran for a few years on television, until the civil war occurred. A Smelch bear had a tiny transistor inside its midsection. When the right paw was pressed, he would tell you he loved you.

Apparently, this toy had been reworked by Caroline's new friend to include just his voice and a way to record another voice. There were notes attached to each paw. One read: Press the right paw to listen. The other note read: Press the left paw to record your voice. Caroline pressed the left paw and a voice came through: muffled, but otherwise audible.

"Hello! I am Gerald! Please say hello back!"

The voice startled Caroline. She screamed and dropped the bear.

Caroline felt silly. Why should that cause alarm? A voice saying 'hello'? Caroline played the message all night along. She took the bear to bed with her and squeezed the paw every now and again until she fell asleep. "Hello! I am Gerald! Please say hello back!" rocked her to gentle sleep.

The next morning, Caroline decided to say hello back. She pressed the other paw and recorded her voice. "Hello!" She exclaimed, giggled, and hid her face. She cleared her throat and continued. "I am Caroline! Please say hello back!" She giggled again before the recorder turned off. She placed the bear back in the little red box, put the lid back on, started to tie the ribbon, and then stopped. She thought a second, hobbled over to a drawer and found a black sash and a pair of scissors.

The scissors sliced the sash into three quarters. Caroline measured each one and inspected them to make sure no embarrassing shreds were visible. She chose the middle one, removed the ribbon and tied the new fashioned black ribbon around the lid. She extracted the old label, patted down a new one with the addresses switched. Caroline hobbled over to the mail shoot, pressed a button and it slid open. Carefully, she placed the box on the tray, pressed the button again and off it went.

She hobbled over to her chair, ready to watch Gerald receive his package. He smiled hugely and waved to Caroline. She waved back, but not as energetically as Gerald. He left his chair, disappeared into another room. A few minutes later, Gerald returned to his chair holding the little red box. He quickly opened the box, disregarding the black ribbon and tossing the top over his back. He retrieved the little stuffed bear and pressed the right paw.

Caroline saw Gerald's face light up. He hugged the bear close to him and gave it a gentle kiss on the cheek.

Caroline didn't know how to react to that. She was shocked. She hardly knew Gerald and he was already kissing her cheek... well, the bear's cheek, but still!

Still... no one had dared to make such overtures to Caroline, real or imaginary. Once at the university, a boy named Jacek showed interest in Caroline. He would open the doors for her, make sure she was safe going down the stairs using her crutches or walker. He even bought once. Of course, all of that was before a man in a black trench coat and a black bowler came and told Caroline's mother that Caroline was not allowed back at the university and that she had to go into an institution for her kind.

The next day, the box came back to Caroline. She had a whole night to think about the kiss, and a whole night to wonder if Gerald would do it again. Should she send the

box back? Say hello again? Or send another message?

She opened the box carefully, retrieved the stuffed bear. Again, there was a note on each paw. The one on the right said 'squeeze me', the one on left said, 'please leave a message'.

Caroline squeezed the right paw and Gerald's voice came through, still a bit muffled, as if he were too close to the microphone, nonetheless, quite audible.

"Hello!" Gerald's voice came from the bear's midsection. "I like you, Caroline! You are very pretty!"

Caroline smiled. She rather liked being called pretty. She actually wanted to see Gerald kiss the bear's paw again. She didn't mind if he called her pretty every day.

Caroline heard the front door slam shut.

She turned to find Mr. Klon behind her.

"Well, well, well," he said with a wry grin on his face. His lopsided eye was fixed upon the bear in Caroline's hands. "Would that be a Smelch bear in your hands?"

Caroline froze inside.

Mr. Klon could cause Gerald and her quite a bit of trouble. He could tell someone and they could both be ordered by the government to be destroyed. She looked out her window and saw Gerald watching the scene as it unfolded.

Mr. Klon ambled over to Caroline, took the bear from her hands. Scrutinizing the stuffed bear, he turned it over in his hands. "I have not seen one of these in years," Mr. Klon forced a bitter laugh from his diaphragm. "I've forgotten how ugly these things were. So glad my children are too grown for these." He read the note, squeezed the right paw.

"Hello!" Gerald's voice came from the bear's midsection. "I like you, Caroline! You are very pretty!"

Mr. Klon laughed again, shook his head. He saw

past Caroline and saw Gerald watching from his window, a very worried look on his face. "Aah," Mr. Klon said. "I see. We have made a friend from our neighbors across the river." Mr. Klon sniffed. "A neighbor that happens to an enemy."

Gerald disappeared from his window. Caroline felt terrible. She'd gotten both of them in trouble. She didn't mind so much if it was just her, but... she didn't really know Gerald. He was somewhat... innocent.

"You realize what I must do," Mr. Klon said. He sighed, snarled at the bear. "I'll have to tell someone about all of this. Unless..." his lopsided eye transfixed on Caroline, who was by now weeping uncontrollably. "Unless you sign over the rest of your trust fund to me. I'll make sure you are taken care of." The other eye focused on Caroline and he gave her a quick, reassuring smile. "Yes," he nodded. "I'll make sure you taken care of."

A bell rang. A piece of mail came down the tubes and the air boosted a package out of the mail shoot. The box fell to the floor and tumbled toward Mr. Klon's nicely polished shoes. He laughed, turned to Caroline.

"This 'Gerald' must be a simpleton! He's sent you another present! While I'm still here... tsk, tsk, tsk." He clucked his tongue to punctuate the horrible situation. He unraveled the red sash, removed the lid. "He's sent you another Smelch bear! This man is a fool! A note... not two notes?" Mr. Klon shook his head and laughed. "The note says, press my right paw...." Mr. Klon pressed the right paw with his thumb and forefinger.

"Duck, Caroline!" Gerald's muffled voice could be heard.

Mr. Klon and Caroline exchanged a curious glance. Caroline heard the ticking. It came to her what was inside that bear. She fell to the floor hard, covered her head and

face.

The world became silent for a moment.

The explosion rocked the apartment, and the room was filled with smoke. The last two things Caroline remembered before she passed out, was hearing Mr. Klon's screams, and a pair of arms picking her up.

3

Caroline awoke inside a strange place. She lay in a bed with several red pillows and a patchwork quilt that showed the history of Baltica. Her eyes swirled around the room and saw multiple Smelch bears lying around. Some of them were without the skin, just a plastic skeleton sitting on a work bench, and a few transistors by a chair. She focused her eyes a little more and found Gerald hovering over her, smiling. He kissed her hand and helped her to a sitting position.

Over by his crutch and walker, was a walkie-talkie. A muffled man's voice could be heard in between static noise. The man seemed to be speaking in riddles or code words. She smiled back at Gerald. Not exactly because he was at her side, but a realization crossed her mind.

A year later, Caroline and Gerald were still sharing his apartment and the view across the river. Her old apartment had undergone some renovations. In that that time no one had occupied the place until one day, a man in a wheelchair showed up. This man had very pale, powder white skin, with very red hair and one eye larger than the other.

Caroline couldn't be sure, but he looked a lot like Mr. Klon.

***

London stared at the drunk.

"So... you don't like the story?"

"Something tells me it's not true," London said.

"I never said it fucking was!" The drunk screamed.

He picked up his shot glass and the bottle of Hennessey and went to a table in the back.

London smiled. He unzipped the duffle bag sitting on the stool next to him. The Smelch bear was barely visible. London zipped up the duffle bag. He drank down the rest of the whiskey, threw some green on the counter.

He picked up the duffle bag and ambled over to the drunk.

"Hey!" London called out. He tossed the duffle bag at the drunk, and it hit him in the midsection, landed in his lap. The drunk coughed and spit his whiskey out.

"What'd you do that for? Mutha fucker!"

"Judy is staying at The Green Gala motel," London said. "She'd be glad to see her Father." London turned on his heels, headed for the exit. He laughed. "Even if her Father is a fuck up."

Death Letter Blues

1

Quarry put his tattered blue jacket on and straightened his red fat tie, and he didn't give a shit who liked it. All his life, no one cared about Quarry. All his life he'd been one second too late to be a winner. All his life, someone, somewhere, home, school, or job, tried to bully Quarry into being someone he wasn't. He looked in the mirror and smiled for the first time in weeks. Quarry put his hand in the left pocket of his jeans and felt for the Smith and Wesson .45. He was going to do something about those people.

***

"There's a warehouse I need you to go to," Choaladi said. "I need you to collect some money."

Choaladi was eating his lunch. Salmon and pineapples. He didn't offer London any, knowing that London didn't like pineapples. Plus, this was a job that needed done two weeks ago, so Choaladi was in a hurry. He promised Guggenheim he would have Barry London fix this problem, but the last few weeks had been hectic, with his fixer tied up with being a handler for a football player, who ended up dead in a Vegas hotel room. More problems were caused than fixed, some were London's fault, and some were not. At this time, it mattered little. Choaladi was still upset with him.

"Okay," London said. "Where's the warehouse?"

"Buckrowe, off of Nazarene and third."

"By the old Power plant. Yeah. I know where it is," London said.

"Good, good," Choaladi said.

"Mr. Choaladi?"

Choaladi didn't answer him. He kept eating, his eyes never setting on London.

"Okay. I get it," London said. "You're pissed at me."

Choaladi chewed slowly, carefully. "How did you guess, eh?"

"The fact that you won't even look at me," London said.

"If…" Choaladi chewed even slower, swallowed his food. "If I look at you... I just might stab you in the face with this knife." He showed London jagged steak knife that had seen better days. "Two problems with that. 1: I do not have the energy to bury bodies anymore. 2: It's a fact... I'll never find better fixer. So... you are fucking off the hook. Now get out of my fucking sight. Or I change my mind on number one."

London couldn't help but smile at that.

***

The moment he read the letter informing him that his sister Tess was dead, Quarry decided he was through with caring what others thought. He was through with others trying mold him into someone he was not, and he was definitely through with being violently pushed into a corner, having to endure physical and mental abuse.

Tess had been a good girl. Tess had been good in school. Tess had studied hard, went to nursing school and finally got a good job in Newport General. But Tess made the same terrible mistake their Mother always made. Her choice in men was abhorrently awful. Quarry didn't know if his father was bad to his mother. Tess and Quarry had

different fathers. As a matter of fact, Quarry's father had been a next door neighbor ... well, you get the picture. He always thought that was the reason Tess's father hated him. The man always used his fists to get his point across. Most of the time Quarry was on the receiving end of the man's exclamation points. He was a mean drunk who never had any money and most times never had a job.

Quarry's real father had been a horn player who once jammed with Miles Davis in a club on 51st street. Quarry's real father also had a terrible gambling problem and often hung out with the wrong type of people. He was pinched for a liquor store robbery and spent five years in jail. The last year of his sentence he found out he had cancer of the pancreas. Quarry lived with his real father the last six months. Quarry was only twenty.

***

Pop came out of the house waving at London and calling out his name. The eighty year old black man was surprisingly spry and fast for his age. He ran down the hill, jumped a small patch of rose bed that stopped growing three years ago, and landed on the blacktop of the driveway. He was holding something in his hands, swinging it back and forth. London couldn't quite make it out.

"Barry, hold up!"

"Jesus, Pop. You're gonna stroke out running like that," London said.

"Please, son," Pop chuckled. "I'm in better shape than you are. I haven't smoked a cigarette in thirty years and I only have a shot of bourbon on Saturday nights before bed."

"Notwithstanding a Taco and a Hamburger for lunch every day," London said.

"My diet is better than yours, Barry. The amount of steak you eat when you go out of town, pack of cigarettes every three days..."

"Okay, okay, Pop." London held up his hands. "You win. You are in better shape than me. You got it, buddy." London laughed. "What do you want? I gotta take care of this before Choaladi has my head on a pole."

"I need you to take this book back to Harlan," Pop said. He handed a thick paperback to London.

"Dune," London read the title out loud. He turned the book over a few times in his hands, amazed at how thick it was. "What's Harlan going to do with it? Beat somebody to death with it?"

"No, son," Pop said. "He's going to read it. There are some people who still read. Believe it or not."

Harlan Eckert was a person London couldn't figure out. Except maybe he was a bald face liar. The man claimed he worked in special intelligence in WWII, except he could only have been twelve years old in nineteen forty two. He knew Lyndon Johnson. Guarded the Beatles on their first tour of America, and used to buy drugs for Miles Davis, since the FBI paid Harlan to kill him, or get him so strung out he couldn't make music anymore. Had started the three day war between Israel and Egypt. He claimed he was Farrah Fawcett's one and only love, she pined for him. He was one of James Garner's best friends, grew up together on an Indian reservation in Oklahoma.

Of course, London's favorite story from Harlan was he stole the famed Tamarri jewel from Monaco, which quite possibly pointed to why Princess Grace Kelly was murdered. London always pointed out to Harlan that Grace Kelly was not murdered. He would raise a finger and say, "Aah... that's what they want you to think."

"Pop... can Harlan actually read?"

"That's not the point, Barry," Pop chuckled as he headed back to Choaladi's house.

"Okay, okay... I'll run this to Harlan after I take care of this job," London said. He placed the book in the breast pocket of his coat. The book was so thick, London had to stuff it in.

***

Tess was a good girl. But Tess loved bad boys. Just like her Mother, the attraction to the worst kind of man, loud, obnoxious, and arrogant, was extremely strong. Tess had one child when she was fourteen. No one in the family was supposed to talk about the boy. He was born with severe mental problems, and as everyone suspected, the boy was the product of incest. The state took the child away after four months and Tess confessed to Quarry that was she glad.

Tess was still a good girl. At least in Quarry's eyes. She cared for people. Sometimes too much. She loved and wanted to be loved back, at any cost. Often an abusive, sometimes cheating boyfriend, sometimes a cheating husband, would leave Tess to fend for herself in a cold, uncaring world. Often leaving her with terrible bruises and emotional scars.

After Quarry put his Father's tattered jacket on, and badly tied the red fat tie around his scrawny neck, he re-read the letter his friend Tony had written informing Quarry that his sister was dead. The second thing Quarry did was march down to the warehouse where they placed dry groceries on pallets and loaded them onto trucks to be shipped to supermarkets. He had to take care of some unfinished business.

Thompson was his shift manager and he was a fat

man who insulted Quarry every chance he got. The past two months, Thompson took it on himself to take Quarry behind the warehouse after work and beat him until Quarry understood he did not talk back. All because Quarry insulted Thompson back in front of other workers. Some of them had actually laughed at the jab, others gasped. That's what Quarry thought. Really, Thompson thought Quarry overheard their plans to rob a rival warehouse of all the money in its safe. If that money went missing, the banks could foreclose on the business and Yarbro wouldn't have any competition.

Quarry felt like he'd come into his own that afternoon. In reality, he'd done nothing but anger Thompson, who promptly jumped him in the alley behind the warehouse. The beating was severe, and the following two weeks, Thompson gave Quarry another one just as a reminder.

2

London drove down to the warehouse in his'73 Cougar. He parked out back where the loading docks were. Men were loading pallets of groceries on tractor trailers. He saw Yarbro directing several guys with pallet jacks under full pallets, placing them on the trucks. Yarbro looked like he had gas pains when he noticed London.

"Shit, man," Yarbro said. He tore off a yellow label from the clipboard, signed his name on it. "I swear to you, London," he pushed the label into a driver's hand. "I'll have Choaladi's money Friday."

London chuckled. "That's not going to work, Yarbro."

Yarbro walked a few inches, swung his head left to indicate he wanted London to follow him. They went around the last building where the dumpsters and old broken pallets were. London hated coming to the warehouse. Reminded him of his first job when he was seventeen.

"Come on, Barry. You know I'm good for it," Yarbro said.

"You guys did the job, right?"

"Well... yeah. One guy was a little squirrely, but..."

London placed Yarbro in a head lock and tightened his arms every time Yarbro screamed. The struggle lasted less than two minutes before Yarbro relaxed. London loosened his grip slightly.

"Where's the fucking money, Yo-yo? Huh?!"

"In-in the safe..." Yarbro barely managed. He grunted and tried again. "I'm sorry... I was going to bet on the Jets and double my money... then give Choaladi his

tribute..."

London let go.

Yarbro fell to his knees, the clipboard followed, bounced off the pavement. All the labels and papers scattered and were blown everywhere by a sweeping wind. Yarbro coughed.

"I'm sorry," his voice was strained. "It will never happen again, Barry."

"I know it won't, Yarbro," London lit a Marlboro. He blew out some smoke, winced at the harsh wind on a warm spring day. "The next time it happens, I'll unload my Glock in your face. Understand?"

Yarbro stood, coughed some more. "Yes," he said. "Yes. Completely understood."

"Now go get the fucking money, Yo-Yo."

"Okay. Okay. Be back in a second, Barry."

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Quarry immediately went to the train station and caught a train back to his hometown of Newport. As soon as the train stopped, his feet beat down the sidewalk and found his friend Tony. They had lunch at a burger joint, where Tony gave the name of the men who contributed to the death of his Tess.

Apparently these men shared Tess in her apartment bedroom. They were too rough with her and she died two days later from vaginal bleeding. The details of the situation were much too sickening for Quarry to listen. His mind went blank while Tony took too much pleasure in telling the story. They headed back to Tony's place to come up with a plan. Tony got high and told the story about Tess again. His leering smile was too much for Quarry, so he shot Tony in the face.

Quarry went Greenway bar and found the five men sitting at a table, drinking and celebrating their latest conquest. Quarry shot two of the men of the men, and ran out of the bar, and hopped on a train. He now knew what he had to do.

Quarry had to go take care of Thompson.

He saw Thompson in the back office, and just like in all the westerns he'd ever seen, Quarry called out Thompson and shot him twice in the chest, while the man still sat at his desk.

3

London heard the gunshots. He tossed his cigarette aside and rushed inside the warehouse. A man on a forklift was slumped over, a bullet in his head. Yarbro was crawling between a pallet of bath tissues and a pallet of canned corn, leaving a bloody trail. A tall, chubby man with a shaven head and coke bottle glasses stood in a long black trench coat. He was standing over another man with a chest wound.

"She was a good girl!" Quarry screamed.

"What the fuck is going on?" London said.

Quarry turned quickly and fired at London.

The bullet traveled fast and in the straightest line London had ever seen. Quarry was about fifteen feet from him and he wasn't sure if the man had previous experience with gun, London's guess was no. Quarry was clumsy, ridiculous looking and even made a squawking noise, possibly believing that was his battle cry.

The bullet made a bee-line for London's heart. The force was so great it knocked him on his back. It felt exactly the way an old uncle of London's had explained being kicked in the chest by a horse. London coughed sporadically, tried to catch his breath. He looked at his wound and saw no blood. Only shredded paper.

Quarry was stunned that London stood. He was even more surprised when London drew his Glock from a side holster. Quarry squealed, dropped his .45. Quarry turned to run and London fired twice. One bullet struck Quarry in the ankle, the other passed through his right shoulder. Quarry fell to the cement floor, crying out for help, "A crazy man just shot me!"

***

London staggered out of the warehouse and finally to his car. Sirens were coming all points. He sped off and just made it on to Crowder Ave. when three police cruisers whipped by him. They went on, not thinking he just came from the place of a shooting spree. London pulled into a convenience store parking lot.

He opened up his jacket and ragged pages of Dune fell to his crotch. He opened his shirt and saw he wasn't bleeding, just a huge black and blue welt had formed right over the right side of his chest. Another page fell to his lap. A bullet with its head pushed in flat also fell to his lap along with bluish stone.

Confused at first, London picked up the jewel. Then he remembered the conversation he and Pop were having about Harlan Eckert. Furthermore, what he remembered he thought of Harlan. Holding the Tamarri jewel in the sunlight, London no longer thought Harlan Eckert was world's biggest liar.

4

Police Chief Simmons called Detective Lassiter into his office.

"What's the story?" Simmons took a on his cigar, knowing full well that smoking was not allowed in the building. It didn't matter, he was Chief of Police. "You find the guy who shot Quarry?"

"Naw," Lassiter said. "The guy slipped out. I don't even think he worked there. Everyone I talked to couldn't make an I.D., or if they did, it was conflicting reports." Lassiter raised an eyebrow and sighed.

"What, Lassiter?" Simmons said, stubbed out his cigar.

"You'll want a drink after this, Chief," Lassiter said. "Quarry has no sister."

Simmons put a hand on his aching head. "For fuck's sake."

"No family at all. He's an Orphan. No friend named Tony. No ties at all in Newport. He didn't even go to Newport. No ticket. As a matter of fact, his name isn't even Quarry. It's Jonathan Cummings."

"What?" Simmons screamed. "For cryin' out loud…"

"And get this," Lassiter drew in a heavy breath and exhaled quickly. "He wrote the letter himself."